

# Nehemiah Exposition 1 - Maclaren

## Alexander Maclaren on Nehemiah

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## NEHEMIAH

### PART 1 of 2

by Alexander Maclaren, D. D., Litt.D

### A REFORMER'S SCHOOLING

'The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, 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 disenchanting 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 (Neh 1:1-4).

The time and place are precisely given. 'The month Chisleu' corresponds to the end of November and beginning of December. 'The twentieth year' is that of Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 2:1). '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 cupbearer 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 (Nehemiah 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 (Neh 1:5-11).

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 what Nehemiah had learned from Persian what from a better source. He calls upon the great name which was the special possession 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. Then '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 his 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 indispensable 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 (Leviticus 26:33-45; Deuteronomy 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 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.

## Nehemiah 1:4: THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL EVILS

'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.' —Nehemiah 1:4.

NINETY years had passed since the returning exiles had arrived at Jerusalem. They had encountered many difficulties which had marred their progress and cooled their enthusiasm. The Temple, indeed, was rebuilt, but Jerusalem lay in ruins, and its walls remained as they had been left, by Nebuchadnezzar's siege, some century and a half before. A little party of pious pilgrims had gone from Persia to the city, and had come back to Shushan with a sad story of weakness and despondency, affliction and hostility. One of the travellers had a brother, a youth named Nehemiah, who was a cup-bearer in the court of the Persian king. Living in a palace, and surrounded with luxury, his heart was with his brethren; and the ruins of Jerusalem were dearer to him than the pomp of Shushan.

My text tells how the young cupbearer was affected by the tidings, and how he wept and prayed before God. The accurate dates given in this book show that this period of brooding contemplation of the miseries of his brethren lasted for four months. Then he took a great resolution, flung up brilliant prospects, identified himself with the afflicted colony, and asked for leave to go and share, and, if it might be, to redress, the sorrows which had made so deep a dint upon his heart.

Now, I think that this vivid description, drawn by himself, of the emotions excited in Nehemiah by his countrymen's sorrows, which influenced his whole future, contains some very plain lessons for Christian people, the observance of which is every day becoming more imperative by reason of the drift of public opinion, and the new prominence which is being given to so-called 'social questions.' I wish to gather up one or two of these lessons for you now.

### **I. First, then, note the plain Christian duty of sympathetic contemplation of surrounding sorrows, Nehemiah might have made a great many very good excuses for treating lightly the tidings that his brother had brought him.**

He might have said: 'Jerusalem is along way off. I have my own work to do; it is no part of my business to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. I am the King's cupbearer. They went with their eyes open, and experience has shown that the people who knew when they were well off, and stayed where they were, were a great deal wiser.' These were not his excuses. He let the tidings fill his heart, and burn there.

Now, the first condition of sympathy is knowledge; and the second is attending to what we do know. Nehemiah had probably known, in a kind of vague way, for many a day how things were going in Palestine. Communications between it and Persia were not so difficult but that there would come plenty of Government despatches; and a man at headquarters who had the ear of the monarch, was not likely to be ignorant of what was going on in that part of his dominions. But there is all the difference between hearing vague general reports, and sitting and hearing your own brother tell you what he had seen with his own eyes. So the impression which had existed before was all inoperative until it was kindled by attention to the facts which all the time had been, in some degree, known.

Now, how many of us are there that know — and don't know — what is going on round about us in the slums and back courts of this city? How many of us are there who are habitually ignorant of what we actually know, because we never, as we say, 'give heed' to it. 'I did not think of that,' is a very poor excuse about matters concerning which there is knowledge, whether there is thought or not. And so I want to press upon all you Christian people the plain duty of knowing what you do know, and of giving an ample place in your thoughts to the stark staring facts around us.

Why! loads of people at present seem to think that the miseries, and hideous vices, and sodden immorality, and utter heathenism, which are found down amongst the foundations of every civic community are as indispensable to progress as the noise of the wheels of a train is to its advancement, or as the bilge-water in a wooden ship is to keep its seams tight. So we prate about

'civilisation,' which means turning men into cities. If agglomerating people into these great communities, which makes so awful a feature of modern life, be necessarily attended by such abominations as we live amongst and never think about, then, better that there had never been civilisation in such a sense at all. Every consideration of communion with and conformity to Jesus Christ, of loyalty to His words, of a true sense of brotherhood and of lower things — such as self-interest — every consideration demands that Christian people shall take to their hearts, in a fashion that the churches have never done yet, 'the condition of England question,' and shall ask, 'Lord! what wouldst Thou have me to do?'

I do not care to enter upon controversy raised by recent utterances, the motive of which may be worthy of admiration, though the expression cannot be acquitted of the charge of exaggeration, to the effect that the Christian churches as a whole have been careless of the condition of the people. It is not true in its absolute sense. I suppose that, taking the country over, the majority of the members of, at all events the Nonconformist churches and congregations, are in receipt of weekly wages or belong to the upper ranks of the working-classes, and that the lever which has lifted them to these upper ranks has been God's Gospel I suppose it will be admitted that the past indifference with which we are charged belonged to the whole community, and that the new sense of responsibility which has marked, and blessedly marked, recent years, is largely owing to political and other causes which have lately come into operation. I suppose it will not be denied that, to a very large extent, any efforts which have been made in the past for the social, intellectual, and moral, and religious elevation of the people have had their impulse, and to a large extent their support, both pecuniary and active, from Christian churches and individuals. All that is perfectly true and, I believe, undeniable. But it is also true that there remains an enormous, shameful, dead mass of inertness in our churches, and that, unless we can break up that, the omens are bad, bad for society, worse for the church. If cholera is raging in the slums, the suburbs will not escape. If the hovels are infected, the mansions will have to pay their tribute to the disease. If we do not recognise the brotherhood of the suffering and the sinful, in any other fashion — 'Then,' as a great teacher told us a generation ago now, and nobody paid any attention to him, 'then they will begin and show you that they are your brethren by killing some of you.' And so self-preservation conjoins with loftier motives to make this sympathetic observation of the surrounding sorrows the plainest of Christian duties.

## **II. Secondly, such a realisation of the dark facts is indispensable to all true work for alleviating them.**

There is no way of helping men but by bearing what they bear. No man will ever lighten a sorrow of which he has not himself felt the pressure. Jesus Christ's Cross, to which we are ever appealing as the ground of our redemption and the anchor of our hope, is these, thank God! But it is more than these. It is the pattern for our lives, and it lays down, with stringent accuracy and completeness, the enduring conditions of helping the sinful and the sorrowful. The 'saviours of society' have still, in lower fashion, to be crucified. Jesus Christ would never have been 'the Lamb of God that bore away the sins of the world' unless He Himself had taken our infirmities and borne our sicknesses.' No work of any real use will be done except by those whose hearts have bled with the feel-hag of the miseries which they set themselves to cure.

Oh! we all want a far fuller realisation of that sympathetic spirit of the pitying Christ, if we are ever to be of any use in the world, or to help the miseries of any of our brethren. Such a sorrowful and participating contemplation of men's sorrows springing from men's sins will give tenderness to our words, will give patience, will soften our whole bearing. Help that is flung to people, as you might fling a bone to a dog, hurts those whom it tries to help, and patronising help is help that does little good, and lecturing help does little more. You must take blind beggars by the hand if you are going to make them see; and you must not be afraid to lay your white, clean fingers upon the feculent masses of corruption in the leper's glistening whiteness if you are going to make him whole. Go down in order to lift, and remember that without sympathy there is no sufficient help, and without communion with Christ there is no sufficient sympathy.

## **III. Thirdly, such realisation of surrounding sorrows should drive to communion with God.**

Nehemiah wept and mourned, and that was well. But between his weeping and mourning and his practical work there had to be still another link of connection. 'He wept and mourned,' and because he was sad he turned to God, 'and I fasted and prayed certain days.' There he got at once comfort for his sorrows, his sympathies, and deepening of his sympathies, and thence he drew inspiration that made him a hero and a martyr. So all true service for the world must begin with close communion with God.

There was a book published several years since which made a great noise in its little day, and called itself The Service of Man, which service it proposed to substitute for the effete conception of worship as the service of God. The service of man is, then, best done when it is the service of God. I suppose nowadays it is 'old-fashioned' and 'narrow,' which is the sin of sins at present, but I for my part have very little faith in the persistence and wide operation of any philanthropic motives except the highest — namely, compassion caught from Jesus Christ. I do not believe that you will get men, year in and year out, to devote themselves in any considerable numbers to the service of man unless you appeal to this highest of motives. You may enlist a little corps — and God forbid that I should deny such a plain fact — of selecter spirits to do purely secular alleviative work, with an entire ignoring of Christian motives, but you will never get the army of workers that is needed to grapple with the facts of our present condition, unless you touch the very deepest springs of conduct, and these are to be found in communion with God. All the rest is surface drainage.

Get down to the love of God, and the love of men therefrom, and you have got an Artesian well which will bubble up unfaillingly.

And I have not much faith in remedies which ignore religion, and are brought, without communion with God, as sufficient for the disease. I do not want to say one word that might seem to depreciate what are good and valid and noble efforts in their several spheres. There is no need for antagonism — rather, Christian men are bound by every consideration to help to the utmost of their power, even in the incomplete attempts that are made to grapple with social problems. There is room enough for us all. But sure I am that until grapes and waterbeds cure smallpox, and a spoonful of cold water puts out Vesuvius, you will not cure the evils of the body politic by any lesser means than the application of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We hear a great deal to-day about a 'social gospel,' and I am glad of the conception, and of the favour which it receives. Only let us remember that the Gospel is social second, and individual first. And that if you get the love of God and obedience to Jesus Christ into a man's heart it will be like putting gas into a balloon, it will go up, and the man will get out of the slums fast enough; and he will not be a slave to the vices of the world much longer, and you will have done more for him and for the wide circle that he may influence than by any other means. I do not want to depreciate any helpers, but I say it is the work of the Christian church to carry to the world the only thing that will make men deeply and abidingly happy, because it will make them good.

IV. And so, lastly, such sympathy should be the parent of a noble, self-sacrificing life. Look at the man in our text. He had the ball at his feet. He had the entree of a court, and the ear of a king. Brilliant prospects were opening before him, but his brethren's sufferings drew him, and with a noble resolution of self-sacrifice, he shut himself out from the former and went into the wilderness. He is one of the Scripture characters that never have had due honour — a hero, a saint, a martyr, a reformer. He did, though in a smaller sphere, the very same thing that the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews magnified with his splendid eloquence, in reference to the great Lawgiver, 'And chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God,' and to turn his back upon the dazzlements of a court, than to 'enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season,' whilst his brethren were suffering.

Now, dear friends! the letter of the example may be put aside; the spirit of it must be observed. If Christians are to do the work that they can do, and that Christ has put them into this world that they may do, there must be self-sacrifice with it. There is no shirking that obligation, and there is no discharging our duty without it. You and I, in our several ways, are as much under the sway of that absolute law, that 'if a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it brings forth fruit,' as ever was Jesus Christ or His Apostles. I have nothing to say about the manner of the sacrifice. It is no part of my business to prescribe to you details of duty. It is my business to insist on the principles which must regulate these, and of these principles in application to Christian service there is none more stringent than — 'I will not offer unto my God burnt-offering of that which doth cost me nothing.'

I am sure that, under God, the great remedy for social evils lies mainly here, that the bulk of professing Christians shall recognise and discharge their responsibilities. It is not ministers, city missionaries, Bible-women, or any other paid people that can do the work. It is by Christian men and by Christian women, and, if I might use a very vulgar distinction which has a meaning in the present connection, very specially by Christian ladies, taking their part in the work amongst the degraded and the outcasts, that our sorest difficulties and problems will be solved. If a church does not face these, well, all I can say is, its light will go out; and the sooner the better. 'If thou forbear to deliver them that are appointed to death, and say, Behold! I knew it not, shall not He that weigheth the hearts consider it, and shall He not render to every man according to his work?' And, on the other hand, there are no blessings more rich, select, sweet, and abiding, than are to be found in sharing the sorrow of the Man of Sorrows, and carrying the message of His pity and His redemption to an outcast world. 'If thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul, the Lord shall satisfy thy soul; and thou shalt be as a watered garden, and as a spring of water whose waters fail not.'

## **Nehemiah 3:25: OVER AGAINST HIS HOUSE**

'The priests repaired every one over against his house.' — Nehemiah 3:25.

THE condition of our great cities has lately been forced upon public attention, and all kinds of men have been offering their panaceas. I am not about to enter upon that discussion, but I am glad to seize the opportunity of saying one or two things which I think very much need to be said to individual Christian people about their duty in the matter. 'Every man over against his house' is the principle I desire to commend to you as going a long way to solve the problem of how to sweeten the foul life of our modern cities.

The story from which my text is taken does not need to detain us long. Nehemiah and his little band of exiles have come back to a ruined Jerusalem. Their first care is to provide for their safety, and the first step is to know the exact extent of their defencelessness. So we have the account of Nehemiah's midnight ride amongst the ruins of the broken walls. And then we read of the co-operation of all classes in the work of reconstruction. 'Many hands made light work.' Men and women, priests and nobles, goldsmiths,



apothecaries, merchants, all seized trowel or spade, and wheeled and piled. One man puts up a long length of wall, another can only manage a little bit; another undertakes the locks, bolts, and bars for the gates. Roughly and hastily the work is done. The result, of course, is very unlike the stately structures of Solomon's or of Herod's time, but it is enough for shelter. We can imagine the sigh of relief with which the workers looked upon the completed circle of their rude fortifications.

The principle of division of labour in our text is repeated several times in this list of the builders. It was a natural one; a man would work all the better when he saw his own roof mutely appealing to be defended, and thought of the dear ones that were there. But I take these words mainly as suggesting some thoughts applicable to the duties of Christian people in view of the spiritual wants of our great cities.

### **I. I need not do more than say a word or two about the ruins which need repair.**

If I dwell rather upon the dark side than on the bright side of city life I shall not be understood, as forgetting that the very causes which intensify the evil of a great city quicken the good — the friction of multitudes and the impetus thereby given to all kinds of mental activity. Here amongst us there is much that is admirable and noble — much public spirit, much wise and benevolent expenditure of thought and toil for the general good, much conjoint action by men of different parties, earnest antagonism and earnest co-operation, and a free, bracing intellectual atmosphere, which stimulates activity. All that is true, though, on the other hand, it is not good to live always within hearing of the clatter of machinery and the strife of tongues; and the wisdom that is born of solitary meditation and quiet thought is less frequently met with in cities than is the cleverness that is born of intercourse with men, and newspaper reading.

But there is a tragic other side to all that, which mostly we make up our minds to say little about and to forget. The indifference which has made that ignorance possible, and has in its turn been fed by the ignorance, is in some respects a more shocking phenomenon than the vicious life which it has allowed to rot and to reek unheeded.

Most of us have got so familiarised with the evils that stare us in the face every time we go out upon the pavements, that we have come to think of them as being inseparable from our modern life, like the noise of a carriage wheel from its rotation. And is it so then? Is it indeed inevitable that within a stone's throw of our churches and chapels there should be thousands of men and women that have never been inside a place of worship since they were christened; and have no more religion than a horse? Must it be that the shining structure of our modern society, like an old Mexican temple, must be built upon a layer of living men, flung in for a foundation? Can it not be helped that there should be streets in our cities into which it is unfit for a decent woman to go by day alone, and unsafe for a brave man to venture after nightfall? Must men and women huddle together in dens where decency is as impossible as it is for swine in a sty? Is it an indispensable part of our material progress and wonderful civilisation that vice and crime and utter irreligion and hopeless squalor should go with it? Can all that bilge water really not be pumped out of the ship? If it be so, then I venture to say that, to a very large extent, progress is a delusion, and that the simple life of agricultural communities is better than this unwholesome aggregation of men.

The beginning of Nehemiah's work of repair was that sad midnight ride round the ruined walls. So there is a solemn obligation laid on Christian people to acquaint themselves with the awful facts, and then to meditate on them, till sacred, Christ-like compassion, pressing against the flood-gates of the heart, flings them open, and lets out a stream of helpful pity and saving deeds.

### **II. So much for my first point. My second is — the ruin is to be repaired mainly by the old Gospel of Jesus Christ.**

Far be it from me to pit remedies against each other. The causes are complicated, and the cure must be as manifold as the causes. For my own part I believe that, in regard to the condition of the lowest of our outcast population, drink and lust have done it almost all, and that for all but an infinitesimal portion of it, intemperance is directly or indirectly the cause. That has to be fought by the distinct preaching of abstinence, and by the invoking of legislative restrictions upon the traffic. Wretched homes have to be dealt with by sanitary reform, which may require municipal and parliamentary action. Domestic discomfort has to be dealt with by teaching wives the principles of domestic economy. The gracious influence of art and music, pictures and window-gardening, and the like, will lend their aid to soften and refine. Coffee taverns, baths and wash-houses, workmen's clubs, and many other agencies are doing real and good work. I for one say, 'God speed to them all,' and willingly help them so far as I can.

But, as a Christian man, I believe that I know a thing that if lodged in a man's heart will do pretty nearly all which they aspire to do; and whilst I rejoice in the multiplied agencies for social elevation, I believe that I shall best serve my generation, and I believe that ninety-nine out of a hundred of you will do so too, by trying to get men to love and fear Jesus Christ the Saviour. If you can get His love into a man's heart, that will produce new tastes and new inclinations, which will reform, and sweeten, and purify faster than anything else does.

They tell us that Nonconformist ministers are never seen in the slums; well, that is a libel! But I should like to ask why it is that the

Roman Catholic priest is seen there more than the Nonconformist minister? Because the one man's congregation is there, and the other man's is not — which, being translated into other words, is this: the religion of Jesus Christ mostly keeps people out of the slums, and certainly it will take a man out of them if once it gets into his heart, more certainly and quickly than anything else will.

So, dear friends! if we have in our hearts and in our hands this great message of God's love, we have in our possession the germ out of which all things that are lovely and of good report will grow. It will purify, elevate, and sweeten society, because it will make individuals pure and strong, and homes holy and happy. We do not need to draw comparisons between this and other means of reparation, and still less to feel any antagonism to them or the benevolent men who work them; but we should fix it in our minds that the principles of Christ's Gospel adhered to by individuals, and therefore by communities, would have rendered such a condition of things impossible, and that the true repair of the ruin wrought by evil and ignorance, in the single soul, in the family, the city, the nation, the world, is to be found in building anew on the One Foundation which God has laid, even Jesus Christ, the Living Stone, whose pure life passes into all that are grounded and founded on Him.

### **III. Lastly, this remedy is to be applied by the individual action of Christian men and women on the people nearest them.**

'The priests repaired every one over against his house.' We are always tempted, in the face of large disasters, to look for heroic and large remedies, and to invoke corporate action of some sort, which is a great deal easier for most of us than the personal effort that is required. When a great scandal and danger like this of the condition of the lower layers of our civic population is presented before men, for one man that says, 'What can I do?' there are twenty who say, 'Somebody should do something. Government should do something. The Corporation should do something. This, that, or the other aggregate of men should do something.' And the individual calmly and comfortably slips his neck out of the collar and leaves it on the shoulders of these abstractions.

As I have said, there are plenty of things that need to be done by these somebodies. But what they do (they will be a long time in doing it), when they do get to work will only touch the fringe of the question, and the substance and the centre of it you can set to work upon this very day if you like, and not wait for anybody either to set you the example or to show you the way.

If you want to do people good you can; but you must pay the price for it. That price is personal sacrifice and effort. The example of Jesus Christ is the all-instructive one in the case. People talk about Him being their Pattern, but they often forget that whatever more there was in Christ's Cross and Passion there was this in it : — the exemplification for all time of the one law by which any reformation can be wrought on men — that a sympathising man shall give himself to do it, and that by personal influence alone men will be drawn and won from out of the darkness and filth. A loving heart and a sympathetic word, the exhibition of a Christian life and conduct, the fact of going down into the midst of evil and trying to lift men out of it, are the old-fashioned and only magnets by which men are drawn to purer and higher life. That is God's way of saving the world — by the action of single souls on single souls, Masses of men can neither save nor be saved. Not in groups, but one by one, particle by particle, soul by soul, Christ draws men to Himself, and He does His work in the world through single souls on fire with His love, and tender with pity learned of Him.

So, dear friends! do not think that any organisation, any corporate activity, any substitution of vicarious service, will solve the problem. It will not. There is only one way of doing it, the old way that we must tread if we are going to do anything for God and our fellows: 'The priests repaired every one over against his house.'

Let me briefly point out some very plain and obvious things which bear upon this matter of individual action. Let me remind you that if you are a Christian man you have in your possession the thing which will cure the world's woe, and possession involves responsibility. What would you think of a man that had a specific for some pestilence that was raging in a city, and was contented to keep it for his own use, or at most for his family's use, when his brethren were dying by the thousand, and their corpses polluting the air? And what shall we say of men and women who call themselves Christians, who have some faith in that great Lord and His mighty sacrifice; who know that the men they meet with every day of their lives are dying for want of it, and who yet themselves do absolutely nothing to spread His name, and to heal men's hurts? What shall we say? God forbid that we should say they are not Christians! but God forbid that anybody should flatter them with the notion that they are anything but most inconsistent Christians!

Still further, need I remind you that if we have found anything in Jesus Christ which has been peace and rest for ourselves, Christ has thereby called us to this work? He has found and saved us, not only for our own personal good. That, of course, is the prime purpose of our salvation, but not its exclusive purpose. He has saved us, too, in order that the Word may be spread through us to those beyond. 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal until the whole was leavened,' and every little bit of the dough, as it received into itself the leaven, and was transformed, became a medium for transmitting the transformation to the next particle beyond it and so the whole was at last permeated by the power. We get the grace for ourselves that we may pass it on; and as the Apostle says: 'God hath shined into our hearts that we might give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.'

And you can do it, you Christian men and women, every one of you, and preach Him to somebody. The possession of His love gives



the commission; ay! and it gives the power. There is nothing so mighty as the confession of personal experience. Do not you think that when that first of Christian converts, and first of Christian preachers went to his brother, all full of what he had discovered, his simple saying, 'We have found the Messiah,' was a better sermon than a far more elaborate proclamation would have been? My brother! if you have found Him, you can say so; and if you can say so, and your character and your life confirm the words of your lips, you will have done more to spread His name than much eloquence and many an orator. All can preach who can say, 'We have found the Christ.'

The last word I have to say is this: there is no other body that can do it but you. They say: — 'What an awful thing it is that there are no churches or chapels in these outcast districts!' If there were they would be what the churches and chapels are now — half empty. Bricks and mortar built up into ecclesiastical forms are not the way to evangelise this or any other country. It is a very easy thing to build churches and chapels. It is not such an easy thing — I believe it is an impossible thing (and that the sooner the Christian church gives up the attempt the better) — to get the godless classes into any church or chapel. Conducted on the principles upon which churches and chapels must needs at present be conducted, they are for another class altogether; and we had better recognise it, because then we shall feel that no multiplication of buildings like this in which we now are, for instance, is any direct contribution to the evangelisation of the waste spots of the country, except in so far as from a centre like this there ought to go out much influence which will originate direct missionary action in places and fashions adapted to the outlying community.

Professional work is not what we want. Any man, be he minister, clergyman, Bible-reader, city missionary, who goes among our godless population with the suspicion of pay about him is the weaker for that. What is needed besides is that ladies and gentlemen that are a little higher up in the social scale than these poor creatures, should go to them themselves; and excavate and work. Preach, if you like, in the technical sense; have meetings, I suppose, necessarily; but the personal contact is the thing, the familiar talk, the simple exhibition of a loving Christian heart, and the unconventional proclamation in free conversation of the broad message of the love of God in Jesus Christ. Why, if all the people in this chapel who can do that would do it, and keep on doing it, who can tell what an influence would come from some hundreds of new workers for Christ? And why should the existence of a church in which the workers are as numerous as the Christians be an Utopian dream? It is simply the dream that perhaps a church might be conceived to exist, all the members of which had found out their plainest, most imperative duty, and were really trying to do it.

No carelessness, no indolence, no plea of timidity or business shift the obligation from your shoulders if you are a Christian. It is your business, and no paid agents can represent you. You cannot buy yourselves substitutes in Christ's army, as they used to do in the militia, by a guinea subscription. We are thankful for the money, because there are kinds of work to be done that unpaid effort will not do. But men ask for your money; Jesus Christ asks for yourself, for your work, and will not let you off as having done your duty because you have paid your subscription. No doubt there are some of you who, from various circumstances, cannot yourselves do work amongst the masses of the outcast population. Well, but you have got people by your side whom you can help. The question which I wish to ask of my Christian brethren and sisters now is this: Is there a man, woman, or child living to whom you ever spoke a word about Jesus Christ? Is there? If not, do not you think it is time that you began?

There are people in your houses, people that sit by you in your counting-house, on your college benches, who work by your side in mill or factory or warehouse, who cross your path in a hundred ways, and God has given them to you that you may bring them to Him. Do you set yourself, dear brother, to work and try to bring them. Oh! if you lived nearer Jesus Christ you would catch the sacred fire from Him; and like a bit of cold iron lying beside a magnet, touching Him, you would yourselves become magnetic and draw men out of their evil and up to God.

Let me commend to you the old pattern: 'The priests repaired one over against his house'; and beseech everyone to take the trowel and spade, or anything that comes handiest, and build, in the bit nearest you, some living stones on the true Foundation.

## **Nehemiah 4:9-21: DISCOURAGEMENTS AND COURAGE**

"Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them. 10. And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall. 11. And our adversaries said, They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them, and slay them, and cause the work to cease. 12. And it came to pass, that when the Jews which dwelt by them came, they said unto us ten times, From all places whence ye shall return unto us they will be upon you. 13. Therefore set I in the lower places behind the wall, and on the higher places, I even set the people after their families with their swords, their spears, and their bows. 14. And I looked and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your

wives, and your houses. 15. And it came to pass, when our enemies heard that it was known unto us, and God had brought their counsel to nought, that we returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work. 16. And it came to pass from that time forth, that the half of my servants wrought in the work, and the other half of them held both the spears, the shields, and the bows, and the habergeons; and the rulers were behind all the house of Judah. 17. They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded. every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon. 18. For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded. And he that sounded the trumpet was by me. 19. And I said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, The work is great and large, and we are separated upon the wall, one far from another. 20. In what place therefore ye hear the sound of the trumpet, resort ye thither unto us: our God shall fight for us. 21. So we laboured in the work: and half of them held the spears from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared.' — Nehemiah 4:9-21.'

COMMON hatred has a wonderful power of uniting former foes. Samaritans, wild Arabs of the desert, Ammonites, and inhabitants of Ashdod in the Philistine plain would have been brought together for no noble work, but mischief and malice fused them for a time into one. God's work is attacked from all sides. Herod and Pilate can shake hands over their joint antagonism.

This passage paints vividly the discouragements which are apt to dog all good work, and the courage which refuses to be discouraged, and conquers by bold persistence. The first verse (v. 9) may stand as a summary of the whole, though it refers to the preceding, not to the following, verses. The true way to meet opposition is twofold — prayer and prudent watchfulness. 'Pray to God, and keep your powder dry,' is not a bad compendium of the duty of a Christian soldier. The union of appeal to God with the full use of common sense, watchfulness, and prudence, would dissipate many hindrances to successful service.

### **I. In Neh 4: 10-12 Nehemiah tells, in his simple way of the difficulties from three several quarters which threatened to stop his work.**

He had trouble from the workmen, from the enemies, and from the mass of Jews not resident in Jerusalem. The enthusiasm of the builders had cooled, and the magnitude of their task began to frighten them. Verse 6 tells us that the wall was completed 'unto the half of it'; that is, to one-half the height, and half-way through is just the critical time in all protracted work. The fervour of beginning has passed; the animation from seeing the end at hand has not sprung up. There is a dreary stretch in the centre, where it takes much faith and self-command to plod on unfainting. Half-way to Australia from England is the region of sickening calms. It is easier to work in the fresh morning or in the cool evening than at midday. So in every great movement there are short-winded people who sit down and pant very soon, and their prudence croaks out undeniable facts. No doubt strength does become exhausted; no doubt there is 'much rubbish' (literally 'dust'). What then? The conclusion drawn is not so unquestionable as the premises. 'We cannot build the wall.' Why not? Have you not built half of it? And was not the first half more embarrassed by rubbish than the second will be?

It is a great piece of Christian duty to recognise difficulties, and not be cowed by them. The true inference from the facts would have been, 'so that we must put all our strength into the work, and trust in our God to help us.' We may not be responsible for discouragements suggesting themselves, but we are responsible for letting them become dissuatives. Our one question should be, Has God appointed the work? If so, it has to be done, however little our strength, and however mountainous the accumulations of rubbish.

The second part in the trio was taken by the enemies — Sanballat and Tobiah and the rest. They laid their plans for a sudden swoop down on Jerusalem, and calculated that, if they could surprise the builders at their work, they would have no weapons to show fight with, and so would be easily despatched. Killing the builders was but a means; the desired end is significantly put last (v. 11), as being the stopping of the abhorred work. But killing the workmen does not cause the work to cease when it is God's

work, as the history of the Church in all ages shows. Conspirators should hold their tongues. It was not a hopeful way of beginning an attack, of which the essence was secrecy and suddenness, to talk about it. 'A bird of the air carries the matter.'

The third voice is that of the Jews in other parts of the land, and especially those living on the borders of Samaria, next door to Sanballat. Verse 12 is probably best taken as in the Revised Version, which makes 'Ye must return to us' the imperative and often-repeated summons from these to the contingents from their respective places of abode, who had gone up to Jerusalem to help in building. Alarms of invasion made the scattered villagers wish to have all their men capable of bearing arms back again to defend their own homes. It was a most natural demand, but in this case, as so often, audacity is truest prudence; and in all high causes there come times when men have to trust their homes and dear ones to God's protection. The necessity is heartrending, and we may well pray that we may not be exposed to it; but if it clearly arises, a devout man can have no doubt of his duty. How many American citizens had to face it in the great Civil War! And how character is ennobled by even so severe a sacrifice!

### **II. The calm heroism of Nehemiah and his wise action in the emergency are told in Neh 4:13-15.**

He made a demonstration in force, which at once showed that the scheme of a surprise was blown to pieces. It is difficult to make out the exact localities in which he planted his men. 'The lower places behind the wall' probably means the points at which the new fortifications were lowest, which would be the most exposed to assault; and the 'higher places' (Auth. Ver.), or 'open places' (Rev. Ver.), describes the same places from another point of view. They afforded room for posting troops because they were without buildings. At any rate, the walls were manned, and the enemy would have to deal, not with unarmed labourers, but with prepared soldiers. The work was stopped, and trowel and spade exchanged for sword and spear. 'And I looked,' says Nehemiah. His careful eye travelled over the lines, and, seeing all in order, he cheered the little army with ringing words. He had prayed (Nehemiah 1:5) to 'the great and terrible God,' and now he bids his men remember Him, and thence draw strength and courage. The only real antagonist of fear is faith. If we can grasp God, we shall not dread Sanballat and his crew. Unless we do, the world is full of dangers which it is not folly to fear.

Note, too, that the people are animated for the fight by reminding them of the dear ones whose lives and honour hung on the issue. Nothing is said about fighting for God and His Temple and city, but the motives adduced are not less sacred. Family love is God's best of earthly gifts, and, though it is sometimes duty to 'forget thine own people, and thy father's house,' as we have just seen, nothing short of these highest obligations can supersede the sweet one of straining every nerve for the well-being of dear ones in the hallowed circle of home.

So the plan of a sudden rush came to nothing. It does not appear that the enemy was in sight; but the news of the demonstration soon reached them, and was effectual. Prompt preparation against possible dangers is often the means of turning them aside. Watchfulness is indispensable to vigour of Christian character and efficiency of work. Suspicion is hateful and weakening; but a man who tries to serve God in such a world as this had need to be like the living creatures in the Revelation, having 'eyes all over.' 'Blessed is the man that [in that sense] feareth always.'

The upshot of the alarm is very beautifully told: 'We returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work.' No time was wasted in jubilation. The work was the main thing, and the moment the interruption was ended, back to it they all went. It is a fine illustration of persistent discharge of duty, and of that most valuable quality, the ability and inclination to keep up the main purpose of a life continuous through interruptions, like a stream of sweet water running through a bog.

### **III. The remainder of the passage tells us of the standing arrangements made in consequence of the alarm (vs. 16-21).**

First we hear what Nehemiah did with his own special 'servants,' whether these were slaves who had accompanied him from Shushan (as Stanley supposes), or his body-guard as a Persian official. He divided them into two parts — one to work, one to watch. But he did not carry out this plan with the mass of the people, probably because it would have too largely diminished the number of builders. So he armed them all. The labourers who carried stones, mortar, and the like, could do their work after a fashion with one hand, and so they had a weapon in the other. If they worked in pairs, that would be all the easier. The actual builders needed both hands, and so they had swords stuck in their girdles.

No doubt such arrangements hindered progress, but they were necessary. The lesson often drawn from them is no doubt true, that God's workers must be prepared for warfare as well as building. There have been epochs in which that necessity was realised in a very sad manner; and the Church on earth will always have to be the Church militant. But it is well to remember that building is the end, and fighting is but the means. The trowel, not the sword, is the natural instrument. Controversy is second best — a necessity, no doubt, but an unwelcome one, and only permissible as a subsidiary help to doing the true work, rearing the walls of the city of God.

'He that soundeth the trumpet was by me.' The gallant leader was everywhere, animating by his presence. He meant to be in the thick of the fight, if it should come. And so he kept the trumpeter by his side, and gave orders that when he sounded all should hurry to the place; for there the enemy would be, and Nehemiah would be where they were. 'The work is great and large, and we are separated ... one far from another.' How naturally the words lend themselves to the old lesson so often drawn from them! God's servants are widely parted, by distance, by time, and, alas! by less justifiable causes. Unless they draw together they will be overwhelmed, taken in detail, and crushed. They must rally to help each other against the common foe.

Thank God! the longing for manifest Christian unity is deeper to-day than ever it was. But much remains to be done before it is adequately fulfilled in the recognition of the common bond of brotherhood, which binds us all in one family, if we have one Father. English and American Christians are bound to seek the tightening of the bonds between them and to set themselves against politicians who may seek to keep apart those who both in the flesh and in the spirit are brothers. All Christians have one great Captain; and He will be in the forefront of every battle. His clear trumpet-call should gather all His servants to His side.

The closing verse tells again how Nehemiah's immediate dependants divided work and watching, and adds to the picture the

continuousness of their toil from the first grey of morning till darkness showed the stars and ended another day of toil. Happy they who thus 'from morn till noon, from noon till dewy eve,' labour in the work of the Lord! For them, every new morning will dawn with new strength, and every evening be calm with the consciousness of 'something attempted, something done.'

## Nehemiah 5:15: AN ANCIENT NONCONFORMIST

'... So did not I, because of the fear of God.' — Nehemiah 5:15.

I Do not suppose that the ordinary Bible-reader knows very much about Nehemiah. He is one of the neglected great men of Scripture. He was no prophet, he had no glowing words, he had no lofty visions, he had no special commission, he did not live in the heroic age. There was a certain harshness and dryness; a tendency towards what, when it was more fully developed, became Pharisaism, in the man, which somewhat covers the essential nobleness of his character. But he was brave, cautious, circumspect, disinterested; and he had Jerusalem in his heart.

The words that I have read are a little fragment of his autobiography which deal with a prosaic enough matter, but carry in them large principles. When he was appointed governor of the little colony of returned exiles in Palestine, he found that his predecessors, like Turkish pashas and Chinese mandarins to-day, had been in the habit of 'squeezing' the people of their Government, and that they had requisitioned sufficient supplies of provisions to keep the governor's table well spread. It was the custom. Nobody would have wondered if Nehemiah had conformed to it; but he felt that he must have his hands clean. Why did he not do what everybody else had done in like circumstances? His answer is beautifully simple: 'Because of the fear of God.' His religion went down into the little duties of common life, and imposed upon him a standard far above the maxims that were prevalent round about him. And so, if you will take these words, and disengage them from the small matter concerning which they were originally spoken, I think you will find in them thoughts as to the attitude which we should take to prevalent practices, the motive which should impel us to a sturdy non-compliance, and the power which will enable us to walk on a solitary road. 'So did not I, because of the fear of God.' Now, then, these are my three points: —

### I. The attitude to prevalent practices.

Nehemiah would not conform. And unless you can say 'No!' and do it very often, your life will be shattered from the beginning. That non-compliance with customary maxims and practices is the beginning, or, at least, one of the foundation-stones, of all nobleness and strength, of all blessedness and power. Of course it is utterly impossible for a man to denude himself of the influences that are brought to bear upon him by the circumstances in which he lives, and the trend of opinion, and the maxims and practices of the world, in the corner, and at the time, in which his lot is cast. But, on the other hand, be sure of this, that unless you are in a very deep and not at all a technical sense of the word, 'Nonconformists,' you will come to no good. None! It is so easy to do as others do, partly because of laziness, partly because of cowardice, partly because of the instinctive imitation which is in us all. Men are gregarious. One great teacher has drawn an illustration from a flock of sheep, and says that if we hold up a stick, and the first of the flock jumps over it, and then if we take away the stick, all the rest of the flock will jump when they come to the point where the first did so. A great many of us adopt our creeds and opinions, and shape our lives for no better reason than because people round us are thinking in a certain direction, and living in a certain way. It saves a great deal of trouble, and it gratifies a certain strange instinct that is in us all, and it avoids dangers and conflicts that we should, when we are at Rome, do as the Romans do. 'So did not I, because of the fear of God.'

Now, brethren! I ask you to take this plain principle of the necessity of non-compliance (which I suppose I do not need to do much to establish, because, theoretically, we most of us admit it), and apply it all round the circumference of your lives. Apply it to your opinions. There is no tyranny like the tyranny of a majority in a democratic country like ours. It is quite as harsh as the tyranny of the old-fashioned despots. Unless you resolve steadfastly to see with your own eyes, to use your own brains, to stand on your own feet, to be a voice and not an echo, you will be helplessly enslaved by the fashion of the hour, and the opinions that prevail.

'What everybody says' — perhaps — 'is true.' What most people say, at any given time, is very likely to be false. Truth has always lived with minorities, so do not let the current of widespread opinion sweep you away, but try to have a mind of your own, and not to be brow-beaten or overborne because the majority of the people round about you are giving utterance, and it may be unmeasured utterance, to any opinions.

Now, there is one direction in which I wish to urge that especially — and now I speak mainly to the young men in my congregation — and that is, in regard to the attitude that so many amongst us are taking to Christian truth. If you have honestly thought out the subject to the best of your ability, and have come to conclusions diverse from those which men like me hold dearer than their lives, that is another matter. But I know that very widely there is spread to-day the fashion of unbelief. So many influential men, leaders of

opinion, teachers and preachers, are giving up the old-fashioned Evangelical faith, that it takes a strong man to say that he sticks by it. It is a poor reason to give for your attitude, that unbelief is in the air, and nobody believes those old doctrines now. That may be. There are currents of opinion that are transitory, and that is one of them, depend upon it. But at all events do not be fooled out of your faith, as some of you are tending to be, for no better reason than because other people have given it up. An iceberg lowers the temperature all round it, and the iceberg of unbelief is amongst us to-day, and it has chilled a great many people who could not tell why they have lost the fervour of their faith.

On the other hand, let me remind you that a mere traditional religion, which is only orthodox because other people are so, and has not verified its beliefs by personal experience, is quite as deleterious as an imitative unbelief. Doubtless, I speak to some who plume themselves on 'never having been affected by these currents of popular opinion,' but whose unblemished and unquestioned orthodoxy has no more vitality in it than the other people's heterodoxy. The one man has said, 'What is everywhere always, and by all believed, I believe'; and the other man has said, 'What the select spirits of this day disbelieve, I disbelieve,' and the belief of one and the unbelief of the other are equally worthless, and really identical.

But it is not only, nor mainly, in reference to opinion that I would urge upon you this nonconformity with prevalent practices as the measure of most that is noble in us. I dare not talk to you as if I knew much about the details of Manchester commercial life, but I can say this much, that it is no excuse for shady practices in your trade to say, 'It is the custom of the trade, and everybody does it.' Nehemiah might have said: 'There never was a governor yet but took his forty shekels a day's worth' — about £1,800 of our money — 'of provisions from these poor people, and I am not going to give it up because of a scruple. It is the custom, and because it is the custom I can do it.' I am not going into details. It is commonly understood that preachers know nothing about business; that may be true, or it may not. But this, I am sure, is a word in season for some of my friends this evening — do not hide behind the trade. Come out into the open, and deal with the questions of morality involved in your commercial life, as you will have to deal with them hereafter, by yourself. Never mind about other people. 'Oh,' but you say, 'that involves loss.' Very likely! Nehemiah was a poorer man because he fed all these one hundred and fifty Jews at his table, but he did not mind that. It may involve loss, but you will keep God, and that is gain.

Turn this searchlight in another direction. I see a number of young people in my congregation at this moment, young men who are perhaps just beginning their career in this city, and who possibly have been startled when they heard the kind of talk that was going on at the next desk, or from the man that sits beside them on the benches at College. Do not be tempted to follow that multitude to do evil. Unless you are prepared to say 'No!' to a great deal that will be pushed into your face in this great city, as sure as you are living you will make shipwreck of your lives. Do you think that in the forty years and more that I have stood here I have not seen successive generations of young men come into Manchester? I could people many of these pews with the faces of such, who came here buoyant, full of hope, full of high resolves, and with a mother's benediction hanging over their heads, and who got into a bad set, and had not the strength to say 'No,' and they went down and down and down, and then presently somebody asked, 'Where is so-and-so?' 'Oh! his health broke down, and he has gone home to die.' 'His bones are full of the iniquity of his youth' — and he made shipwreck of prospects and of life, because he did not pull himself together when the temptation came, and say, 'So did not I, because of the fear of God.'

## **II. Now let me ask you to turn with me to the second thought that my text suggests to me; that is, The motive that impels to this sturdy noncompliance.**

Nehemiah puts it in Old Testament phraseology, 'the fear of God'; the New Testament equivalent is 'the love of Christ.' And if you want to take the power and the life out of both phrases, in order to find a modern conventional equivalent, you will say 'religion.' I prefer the old-fashioned language. 'The love of Christ' impels to this non-compliance. Now, my point is this, that Jesus Christ requires from each of us that we shall abstain, restrict ourselves, refuse to do a great many things that are being done round us.

I need not remind you of how continually He spoke about taking up the cross. I need not do more than just remind you of His parable of the two ways, but ask you, whilst you think of it, to note that all the characteristics

of each of the ways which He sets forth are given by Him as reasons for refusing the one and walking in the other. For example, 'Enter ye in at the strait gate, for strait is the gate' — that is a reason for going in; 'and narrow is the way' — that is a reason for going in; 'and few there be that find it' — that is a reason for going in. 'Wide is the gate' — that is a reason for stopping out; 'and broad is the way' that is a reason for stopping out; 'and many there be that go in thereat' — that is a reason for stopping out. Is not that what I said, that the minority is generally right and the majority wrong? Just because there are so many people on the path, suspect it, and expect that the path with fewer travellers is probably the better and the higher.

But to pass from that, what did Jesus Christ mean by His continual contrast between His disciples and the world? What did He mean by 'the world'? This fair universe, with all its possibilities of help and blessing, and all its educational influences? By no means. He meant by 'the world' the aggregate of things and men considered as separate from God. And when He applied the term to men only,



He meant by it very much what we mean when we talk about society. Society is not organised on Christian principles; we all know that, and until it is, if a man is going to be a Christian he must not conform to the world. 'Know ye not that whosoever is a friend of the world is an enemy of God.'

I would press upon you, dear friends! that our Christianity is nothing unless it leads us to a standard, and a course of conduct in conformity with that standard, which will be in diametrical opposition to a great deal of what is patted on the back, and petted and praised by society. Now, there is an easy-going kind of Christianity which does not recognise that, and which is in great favour with many people to-day, and is called 'liberality' and 'breadth,' and 'conciliating and commending Christianity to outsiders,' and I know not what besides. Well, Christ's words seem to me to come down like a hammer upon that sort of thing. Depend upon it, 'the world' — I mean by that the aggregate of godless men organised as they are in society — does not think much of these trimmers. It may dislike an out-and-out Christian, but it knows him when it sees him, and it has a kind of hostile respect for him which the other people will never get. You remember the story of the man that was seeking for a coachman, and whose question to each applicant was, 'How near can you drive to the edge of a precipice?'

He took the man who said: 'I would keep away from it as far as I could.' And the so-called Christian people that seem to be bent on showing how much their lives can be made to assimilate to the lives of men that have no sympathy with their creeds, are like the rash Jehus that tried to go as near the edge as they could. But the consistent Christian will keep as far away from it as he can. There are some of us who seem as if we were most anxious to show that we, whose creed is absolutely inconsistent with the world's practices, can live lives which are all but identical with these practices. Jesus Christ says, through the lips of His Apostle, what He often said in other language by His own lips when He was here on earth: 'Be ye not conformed to the world.'

Surely such a command as that, just because it involves difficulty, self-restraint, self-denial, and sometimes self-crucifixion, ought to appeal, and does appeal, to all that is noble in humanity, in a fashion that that smooth, easy-going gospel of living on the level of the people round us never can do. For remember that Christ's commandment not to be conformed to the world is the consequence of His commandment to be conformed to Himself. 'Thus did not I' comes second; 'This one thing I do' comes first. You will misunderstand the whole genius of the Gospel if you suppose that, as a law of life, it is perpetually pulling men short up, and saying: Don't, don't, don't! There is a Christianity of that sort which is mainly prohibition and restriction, but it is not Christ's Christianity. He begins by enjoining: 'This do in remembrance of Me,' and the man that has accepted that commandment must necessarily say, as he looks out on the world, and its practices: 'So did not I, because of the fear of God.'

### **III. And now one last word — my text not only suggests the motive which impels to this non-compliance, but also the power which enables us to exercise it.**

'The fear of God,' or, taking the New Testament equivalent, 'the love of Christ,' makes it possible for a man, with all his weakness and dependence on surroundings, with all his instinctive desire to be like the folk that are near him, to take that brave attitude, and to refuse to be one of the crowd that runs after evil and lies. I have no time to dwell upon this aspect of my subject, as I should be glad to have done. Let me sum up in a sentence or two what I would have said. Christ will enable you to take this necessary attitude because, in Himself He gives you the Example which it is always safe to follow. The instinct of imitation is planted in us for a good end, and because it is in us, examples of nobility appeal to us. And because it is in us Jesus Christ has lived the life that it is possible for, and therefore incumbent on, us to live. It is safe to imitate Him, and it is easy not to do as men do, if once our main idea is to do as Christ did.

He makes it possible for us, because He gives the strongest possible motive for the life that He prescribes. As the Apostle puts it, 'Ye are bought with a price, be not the servants of men.' There is nothing that will so deliver us from the tyranny of majorities, and of what we call general opinion and ordinary custom, as to feel that we belong to Him because He died for us. Men become very insignificant when Christ speaks, and the charter of our freedom from them lies in our redemption by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ being our Redeemer is our Judge, and moment by moment He is estimating our conduct, and judging our actions as they are done. 'With me it is a very small matter to be judged of you or of man's judgment. He that judgeth me is the Lord.' Never mind what the people round you say; you do not take your orders from them, and you do not answer to them. Like some official abroad, appointed by the Crown, you do not report to the local authorities; you report to headquarters, and what He thinks about you is the only important thing. So 'the fear of man which bringeth a snare' dwindles down into very minute dimensions when we think of the Pattern, the Redeemer and the Judge to whom we give account.

And so, dear friends! if we will only open our hearts, by quiet humble faith, for the coming of Jesus Christ into our lives, then we shall be able to resist, to refuse compliance, to stand firm, though alone. The servant of Christ is the master of all men. 'All things are yours, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas — all are yours, and ye are Christ's.'