

The Grief of the Godly

By Paris Reidhead*

Let us turn, please, to Nehemiah, Chapter 1. You have your Bible. I am sure that the following, together with that which shall be before us, will make the time more profitable. Nehemiah, the first Chapter.

Just a few words of introduction. You will remember that in his prayer, verses 8 and 9, Nehemiah establishes the reason why he is in Shushan, and Israel is out of the land that was given to Abraham; "Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandest thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations:..." (Neh. 1:8) And they transgressed. The Book of Jeremiah is the testimony of a lonely prophet, seeking to communicate to that generation of inhabitants in Jerusalem that God was going to do the very thing that He had commanded. There were those that sought to please their hearers, and would affirm in contradiction to Jeremiah that their alliance with Egypt and with other nations would protect them, and that they would not go into captivity. But they did. Well you understand that this meant the walls of Jerusalem were broken down, the Temple was destroyed, and multitudes of the people were killed, and the remainder were carried off as captives of war into slavery.

Now the first problem that these captives had was mere survival. Somehow they had to survive if there was ever to be a nation called Israel, and they were there, aware of the happenings, and apparently from what Ezekiel said incapable of believing God had allowed this to happen because of their sin. And they added insult to injury already heaped upon the Lord by going into captivity and being asked by the people, Who are you?, and then dispersed because of their sins they had the temerity to say, "We are the people of the Lord." And they were there out of the land because of His discipline upon them.

We then discover that the second generation had managed by the sheer fact of the tenacity to, hold upon life, of the first, the second generation now had something more than mere survival. It was adjustment, and accommodation. And so we find that the children that were born in captivity thought of it as home. The parents, of course, as some of you that were immigrant parents here, looked back with fond memories on the lands from which they came. And yet, you born in this land could say, "This is my home." And so the Israelites, born in captivity, soon came to look upon their surroundings as normal and natural.

Now the third generation not only has been able to adjust but it has been able to secure promotion and position that makes their stay in this captive land exceedingly desirable. I have been interested in noticing in this present election the combination of names that are on each slate. Each national major national group is represented by one of the names that are being heralded in our speakers over the streets. Well there is reason for this, and be assured it was not all accidental. I am confident that it was true. But when you stop to think that these were immigrants just a few generations ago, and all of us were immigrants but a little while ago.

I was talking just some few weeks ago with my friend Nathan Scharf whom many of you know, a Hebrew Christian business man from Dayton, Ohio, and he was saying that friends would come up to him and say, "Well, why don't you go back to your homeland." And he would look at them and say, "This is my homeland. I was born here." What they meant was, "Why don't you go back to Israel." "Well," he said, "this is where I was born. This is my homeland." Well this was the attitude of the people there that had been taken captive at the time of which Nehemiah is written. They had accommodated themselves. Now there are, as you well know, about twice as many Jewish people in New York City as there are in Israel. And it is not because they have been excluded from Israel. It is because they simply prefer New York City. And though they might be enthusiastic about the new State, and concerned about needs that develop there, this is home.

And so it was that in the time of Ezra permission was granted for a company of people to leave, and go back to Jerusalem. The prime success of Ezra was that of reconstructing the destroyed Temple, but after they had reconstructed the Temple they discovered that life was not all, shall I say, was not all religion, and that having the Temple erected, good as it was, still meant that they had practical problems like, How to get meat and potatoes, and milk and vegetables. And so the people soon became concerned about business. They had to survive in the new land. And thus they were unable to achieve all that had happened. Consequently, there was not a great deal of capital. They borrowed money from the residents, the Samaritan residents and the others that had been brought back to administer the area. And soon they were unable to pay their debts, and so these that

had come over with Ezra were now debtor slaves, and children would be taken from their fathers' homes to work for someone that was not an Israelite at all, simply because the father had been unable to pay back the debt that was due. And then there were not enough eligible young women to go around and so some of the Jewish men would marry some of the people of the land that were there, and thus entered into compromise alliance with these that were no part and no inheritance in Israel.

So when the Book of Nehemiah opens you find that this brother of Nehemiah, Hanani, had with some of his friends just made a trip back to Jerusalem. Now I do not know that they had a greyhound special so that they could go with the ease and comfort with which we would do it. I presume that it meant an overland caravan across the desert. But nevertheless there was communication, and there was transportation, but everyone did not do it. So when Hanani was on his way home, he called by the palace at Shushan, the summer palace of the king, and met his brother who was the cup bearer, the wine bearer to the king. This was an important post, far more important than just holding a cup to the king's lips. It had administrative responsibility. An honorary post, but nonetheless one that carried with it considerable authority. And he was one those that had come to place of prominence and comfort and did not have the least inclination to go back at the time of Ezra. He was not interested in it at all. Life was too comfortable and pleasant for him to make any such pioneering expedition. And apparently he had not even wanted to make the trip. I am sure that if Hanani had been like some of us would, we would have written to our brother and said, "Look, I am going back home. All my life I have wanted to go to Jerusalem. Will you go with me?" And I can see the letter that Nehemiah wrote. Well thanks just the same, but I would rather take my vacation up in Shushan in the king's palace than to ride all day on a lumpy camel and sleep in the desert, and then go back to the lack of convenience that they have in Jerusalem. Thanks just the same. You tell me about it. And this is exactly what happens. And Hanani comes by to tell him about it. And there is then this recognition that Nehemiah had, by virtue of his own contentment and his own complacency, and his own satisfaction with himself, for he was religious and an Israelite as we well see, but synagogue had been established, and he had all the worship with which he was concerned, and therefore he just was not interested in inconveniencing himself in going back and seeing what they fanatics and zealots were doing that had given up a good thing that they had where they were.

Hanani comes by, and in the course of the conversation, rather as though it were just a "by the way you know." Not the prime thing at all. By the way, Hanani, said Nehemiah, how about those Jews that had escaped and left here of the captivity, and how is it at Jerusalem? You know you shouldn't ask questions if you do not want answers. And consequently this question was to embroil Nehemiah in something that he was never expecting. You see, information brings responsibility, and truth brings obligation, and if we do not walk in light then the darkness becomes the greater. We think we can play often with truth and just consider it, and weigh it, and bandy it about the way a child would toss an orange from hand to hand until he was ready to squeeze it, or if he didn't want it he could throw it away. But you cannot do that with truth. In the first place, if you do something happens in you that is disastrous. And in the second place, if you take the truth, something is going to happen to you that may be exceedingly costly. And consequently I can understand why some people say, I am just not interested.

Some years ago down in Atlanta a Pastor that I had known in previous days and ministries came to me and we had lunch together. We talked about general things, and when he was about to leave he said, "Well, I am awfully glad you didn't try to talk to me about any of the things I have been hearing that you are interested in." And I said, "Well why?" "Well," he said, "I'll tell you. I've paid an awful price for the church I have, and the position I have, and the influence I have here, and I am just afraid that if you started to talk, and I started to listen I might become convinced that what you are saying is true. And then, if I was convinced that it was true, I would either have to seek it and obey it, or disobey it. And if I disobeyed I'd get in trouble with the Lord, and if I did obey it I'd get in trouble with my church, and frankly I just don't want to discuss it with you. I'd rather not become involved if you don't mind." And so on that note we parted, for he had made up his mind that he had all he wanted, and he was going in the direction that he had mapped out. And just, "If you don't mind, Lord, don't try to take me any further than I have made up my mind I am going to go."

Well, perhaps this was Nehemiah's attitude. Perhaps it has been your attitude or mine at some time in the past, but thank God He has ways and means of saving us even from our unhappy attitudes. And He certainly did that with Nehemiah. For Hanani said, unto Nehemiah, "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."(Neh. 1:3)

Now do not think for a moment that this was strange information to Nehemiah. He was a man of authority and had influence. I am confident that there is a great deal of difference between facts read, or facts that you have in general information and that which is committed to you by the warm heart of someone that feels deeply. And here is someone that feels deeply. Hanani has been shocked. He has been broken. He has had something happen to him, and he'll never be the same. And so when he speaks the familiar takes on an altogether new dimension of depth, and personal involvement. And so Nehemiah is never the same again.

Now may I have you see with me as I quickly call to your attention some of God's providences concerning Nehemiah. Now the reason for doing this is that I would like to think that perhaps you today are a Nehemiah, serving in some place that is of sufficient responsibility to elicit your loyalty. Perhaps it is not all you envisioned. Perhaps it is not all you aimed for, but at least you have been satisfied to fill it. I would like to think that there is someone to whom I am speaking that like Nehemiah, content up until today, something is going to happen in these next few minutes that will dynamically, completely change your life. It is possible, you know.

Well the first thing I see as I address this to you as a personal matter, that when God has a work to do He will never want for someone to do it. He will have His man. Nehemiah has been prepared. He has been prepared by the discipline that was required in his education as a Jewish lad in all of the tradition and the teachings of Israel. He has been prepared as one that was trained for professional responsibility. He has been prepared because he has been now introduced into all of the protocol of government, and he has been prepared because now he has the ear of the king, as perhaps few others in the day had. God had been secretly preparing Nehemiah when Nehemiah had not the least interest in God's plans, and this I could well say of you. Perhaps the Spirit of God has been secretly preparing you for service in these hours for which you had no thought. You see, we rough hew the ends of our life, and God shapes them to His plan. And so you choose at the crossroads of decision, and God guides the choice, and then you discover at the close of the period of your life that that which you thought was for this purpose was not at all. It was for another purpose. And so it was with Nehemiah. God was secretly preparing him. God had designs on this life. And may it be understood that whom God will use He will prepare, just as He prepared Saul of Tarsus by His discipline under Gamaliel, and his experience in the Sanhedrin, and all of the forensic training that he had as a great logician and debater. He so prepared him to serve the church in the capacity he did.

And then I would also have you remember this, that in this preparation, God always will use faithful men. Someone is going to come into your life; someone is going to be to you as was the brother of Nehemiah, Hanani. Along the way, at some point, someone is going to face you with the truth. Oh, perhaps you have sought to avoid it, perhaps you have sought to escape from it, perhaps you have closed your mind to it, as I am sure the man of whom we are speaking this morning did, but I am equally confident that if God has a plan for you, He is going to find someone that does not care about your favor, not the least interested in your prejudices, is not going to cater to your whims, isn't the least desirous of your applause, someone that is going to tell you God's truth. And you are going to have it.

It was Dr. Tozer¹ here just a few weeks ago that said, "The gifts of the Spirit have been in perpetuity in the church and anyone that challenges them gives evidence of abysmal ignorance." If it had not been for those gifts the church would have perished centuries ago. And there have been those that have dared to stand across the years and speak the truth even though it cut across the grain of some attitudes, actions, God has His remnant everywhere, those men who will speak it and those people that will hear it. And this is why the Lord said, "If they persecute you in one city flee to another because you would have gone through the cities finding those that will hear the message. I have sent you to bring before the end comes." (Matt. 10:23) And thus consequently you must remember that God has the one who is going to say what He wants said, and then whereas there may be those who reject it there will be the Nehemiah here and there that is going to say, "This is God's truth and I so receive it." And I trust today that you are such a one.

And then, of course, God always has those to whom He is prepared to give discernment. It is a terribly lonely thing to see, isn't it? You understand that when you work in the office with unsaved people you see the consequence of their conduct. You know

¹ Aiden Wilson Tozer (1897-1963) Pastor and Author. Christian and Missionary Alliance

that if they pursue this course it is going to lead to disaster. And it is a terrible thing to see certain things happening and you know the ultimate consequence and apparently you are powerless to do anything about it. And equally true it is, it is a gruesome experience to see what is happening to Jerusalem, to see what is happening to the walls, to the testimony, to the honor and the glory of Christ, to the service of His house, and to see it when others do not see it; Hanani is a lonely man. And when you have had someone faithfully minister to you as part of that remnant that will hear and you share that which you have had you experience the loneliness that comes with it. It is a lonely thing. It has always been. Discernment, seeing. Someone else says, "I see trees, men as trees walking." Someone else says, "Yes, but I see the man," and when you say that then the other person either has to credit you with having better insight than he has, or else say you are deluded, or something else. And so it is extremely lonely.

Then, in addition to this that I have just mentioned, is that when God has a work to do He will always have the instrument with which to do it, when God's time comes for His work to begin, He arranges for the servant to meet with His task. Now this is axiomatic. It is not anything profound, but many times people say, "You know I just haven't been really doing anything." Well I am not the least concerned about that. I am concerned, Are you being something. Are you allowing the Spirit of God to speak to your heart through His Word? Are you allowing Him to illumine your mind? Are you walking in the light that God has given you. Because if you are where God wants you to be in relationship to Him, it won't be difficult for Him to put you where He wants you in relation to His work.

I have studied carefully and made a chronology of the life of Paul, and do you know this, dear heart, that in the New Testament you can only account for 18 out of 35 years of Paul's life. Now look how much of the New Testament is attributed to him, written by him. The book of Acts is largely his ministry. And yet, when you take how many months he was here and how many days there and how many weeks here, how many years in this place, you can only account for half of his life. Where was he the rest of the time? Well there were two or three places. And he abode at Antioch. Well what was he doing up there? Well he was aboding that is all. He was perhaps just pursuing his occupation. He did not have to preach every day, you see. He did not have to be busy. He did not have a schedule to keep like some of us do. He did not feel the compulsion that if he didn't then he wasn't. He knew he was, and so he was quite content to be available to the Lord, and when the Lord had nothing for him he was willing to stay. I think in one point we are told by scholars it was probably as long as seven years that he stayed up in Antioch as just one of the Brethren, pursuing his trade, and did not go out anywhere on a preaching mission. Now this is hard to understand, because we have the impression that he was just constantly going, constantly moving. No, not so. He was sensitive to the Spirit of God, and prepared to wait when God's time came for him. For when God wanted the servant and the work to get together there was not any problem about it. He was available. And thus God will use the prepared man. When you come to that place in your experience when that preparation is sufficiently complete that God can count on you, and you are available to Him, you can be very certain that God will use you. And you will know.

Now how will you know? Well in the first place you are going to begin to care deeply. That is what happened here. Information had been there the while. He had known for many years that Ezra did not build the walls at Jerusalem, just the Temple, that the gates had been burned by fire. He knew that, did Nehemiah. But now something strange has happened. God has made him care. He begins to feel. Something is taking hold upon him, he cannot be indifferent. I have known, for instance, for 25 years-all my ministry, ever since reading Elizabeth Dilling's book, The Red Network, and other things published back in the '30s, I have known about the Communist conspiracy, and many others have. But it is of the last two or three years that I find God's people, men that have had the same information I have had, find that the Spirit of God is moving them with a strange burden. They care. Not that they did not care before. But that God's time has come to relate something to that which He is doing. And I believe that this happens with you. You may have lived next door to someone for many years, and you have prayed about them, you have known they were unsaved, but now a burden has come, and you are sensitive to that burden, and you begin to realize that their blood is upon your hands, and you cannot go to church every Sunday and not show concern for them, that God put you next to them that you might be a witness, and now all of a sudden you begin to care, and are burdened about it in a new way, with a new dimension of reality. So it is with Jerusalem. Jerusalem, speaking for God's testimony. Oh, the Temple is built, the worship is there, and I am sure for a time when people are getting their strength, all they need is their personal worship, but the Apostles would abide in Jerusalem for a period. He said, "Tarry there." This was worship. After that the Holy Ghost is come upon you, and ye shall be witnesses. They witnessed on the day of Pentecost. And to our knowledge for four

years after Pentecost there was no witness. They just went into the Temple, had favor with all men, and then the Spirit of God began to move upon them, and persecution began to rise up, and they found that God had something for them. And so as you feel the rising beam of burden in your heart, you know the Lord is working. And when you become concerned about the low state of the church, the walls, for walls speak of testimony, walls speak of witness, walls speak of authority, walls speak of security, but in Jerusalem the walls were down. They had no witness. They had no authority. They had no security. They were simply there with their little habit of worship, and nothing outwardly that was going to evidence that God was in the place.

And now Nehemiah, back there several hundred miles away, becomes greatly concerned that God has no testimony. God has lost His glory. He has lost His witness. His people have lost their authority. And now all of a sudden this man cannot eat and he cannot sleep, and his eyes are filled with tears night and day. Here is a sophisticated government official that had been able to accommodate himself to a pagan court. And what is the matter with you, Nehemiah, said his servants. I can't eat. I can't sleep. My tears will not cease their flowing. God does not have a witness. God does not have His glory given to Him. God is being robbed of that which is His. No one cares about the walls and the ground. No one cares that there is no judgment among His people, for the judges sat in the gates, and the gates are burned with fire. No one cares that there is sin here, compromise with the women of the other nations, that the people are in bondage, that they are enslaved. And Nehemiah weeps.

My friend, until God can find someone whose heart will break and will weep He cannot work. Perhaps the reason for delay was the fact that He had to wait until Nehemiah was to that place where Nehemiah could weep. And so I submit to you when God's time comes, the prepared man strangely is moved by the Spirit of God, and that which he saw before he sees in a new light, that which he knew before now burdens him night and day, that which he has been content to live he now abominates, that which he held before him as something worthwhile now seems to be the utter dross that is not worth a thing. And now all he wants is God's Glory, wants Him to have something, and he will weep night and day because he wants God to get that of which He has been deprived. And this is what you find. This is the grief of the godly, not for themselves. He is not concerned about the Israelite's. They deserve their poverty. They deserve the judgment. He is not concerned about the people. This is not a soulish thing. His concern is the glory of God, that God does not have what He deserves. And now he is weeping because God has been robbed of the witness that His people, His purchased, His redeemed people should have brought.

And I submit to you, dear heart, today that it is the utmost need in the body of Christ that we should recognize wherever we find the walls down, the gates burned with fire, people living in compromising alliances, without separation, people that are in debt to the world and under its obligation in such a way that they are afraid to let their voices be raised for Christ, who have lost concern for God's glory and the authority of His testimony, and the beauty of His house; oh, are there not among us those who can weep, whose tears can flow, whose bodies can lose all taste for food because God deserves the glory that He is being denied. This is the grief of the godly.

Listen to his prayer as he now addresses God. I want you to see how he comes to the Lord: And he said, "I beseech Thee, O Lord (O Lord - Jehovah, the self-existent One that reveals Himself, the immutable One, the unchangeable One, the One that can ever be other than He gloriously is, Jehovah, God of heaven.)" (Psa. 118:25) And thus he speaks of God's sovereignty, that God reigns in heaven and controls earth, and he recognizes that the One upon the throne has not allowed Israel to go into captivity because He was not able to keep her from it. But He sent Israel into captivity because of her sins. Oh God, Jehovah God of Heaven, great God, infinite in all attributes, excelling all other powers, transcending all other authorities, greater than all of the kings of the earth and all the powers of darkness and the angels of the pit, great God. And then notice. Terrible God. Terrible God. You say, Terrible? Yes. That is the word "reverend." Holy and reverend is His name. But the word translated reverend in the Psalm 111 is the same word here translated terrible. What does it mean? It means God striking terror into the hearts of all who sin against Him. Oh what a tragic thing it is when Israel loses its fear of God who said, Do not align with the people of the land. Do not let yourself be sold into debt. Do not become involved. Keep separate. Keep the walls built. Keep the gates strong. And Israel loses its interest, and then He becomes a terrible God. It is easy you know today. We think we can play fast and loose with God, and God won't come to us. But I submit to you that I am afraid of God. Are you? I am afraid of what He can do to my body, I am afraid of what He can do to my children, I am afraid of what He can do, because He is a terrible God. You say that. Yes, He is a terrible God in the sense in which He strikes terror into the hearts of all who sin against Him. He is to be feared. And what has happened today is that people have lost the fear of God. We become pally with Jesus. We have forgotten that the God who is the God of love is also the God of justice and holiness. And Nehemiah saw Him as He is.

And then, He is the God that keepeth covenant. He said, If you disobey Me I give you a covenant, I will send you out. But if you repent and turn, and forsake your wicked way, and call upon Me, oh if I have to go to the uttermost reaches of Heaven, I will bring you back. I will not let anyone keep you, if you will break before Me. He is a covenant keeping God. And so, lowly and broken, trustfully Nehemiah adores God for Who He is.

And then his entreaty. He opens his heart to God. Let now Thine ear be attentive, and Thine eye see. He says, God sees me, I cannot hide from Him. God has heard my words. I cannot excuse them. Lord, you have heard my calumnies and arguments. You know what has come out of me. Lord, I cannot hide from You. Your eyes have seen. Your ears have heard. But, he says, O God, I am not coming for myself. I am not just praying for me. I have all I need: Food, position, honor. It is not my concern. It is Thy glory. It is Thy glory. Something bigger than himself now. He has come to see that God has something that is His.

And then confession, humble confession. O dear, and I confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against Thee. It is so easy to confess someone else's sins. So easy to confess the sins of the church. But when you can say, Against Thee and only have I sinned, I have sinned; I am a man of unclean lips. I confess the sins of Israel which we have sinned. He identifies himself with Israel because he is part of Israel. The sins of Israel are his sins, and because his guilt is theirs.

And then this hearty supplication based upon God's Word, God's promise, and finally his definite desire. There is something that he wants God to do. My dear, is there something that you want God to do? Oh, you say, make me successful. That was Cain's desire, and when he couldn't have it he killed Abel. That is all there was in Cain's heart. Now that was not the prayer. Is your desire, Lord, make our church great. No. No. That is not it. For the walls will surely be broken down. What is it? that ought to be your desire? O God, set in motion through me today something that is going to end up in You getting glory. That is it. Do whatever You need to do in me, Lord, today so that You will get the glory that is Your due. This is the grief of the godly, a prayer that has this one end, the glory of God. The grief of the godly. Is this your grief this morning? Then, if it is, this is your prayer.

Shall we bow together. Perhaps somewhere in this entreaty and exhortation there has come word that is applicable to your heart. Perhaps God has said something to you. In this quiet moment, might I ask you to search your heart. We are coming to the Lord's Table. Nehemiah confessed his sin and the sins of his people. He said, "If any drink unworthily he drinks judgment to himself." (I Cor. 11:29) This is the most sacred hour in our lives when there as a company we gather about that which speaks to us of the body and the blood of the Lord. Oh, dear heart today, has God found you a Nehemiah? Perhaps you have been complacent, but you see the low state of His testimony, the walls fallen down, the gates burned, people in compromise, and God robbed of His glory. Is your heart broken? Is there burden? Are you prepared to put yourself in the way, see God as He is, as He has revealed Himself to be? See yourself and deal with all that is shown in this quiet moment. Let us meditate briefly on what we have heard, prepare our hearts for the Lord's Table.

Father of our Lord Jesus, look upon us now, eternity bound people, nearer to heaven than we have ever been before, and some of us perhaps will never be able to meet again in such a service because Thou wilt either have come or have taken us, and so make this an hour in which we live in the light of Thy presence, and in the honestly we will have when we stand before Thee at the judgment seat. Should there be any unsaved this morning, move upon them to take Him who is represented by the cup, the living Christ, His Bread, His Blood. If there should be any that have a name to live and feel unworthy, O God that they might fast in this hour till Thou hast prepared their hearts and they can take with conscience void of offence toward Thee and toward men. And so seal now the truth to our hearts as we come to the Table of our risen Lord. Amen.

* Reference such as: Delivered at The Gospel Tabernacle Church, New York City on Sunday Morning, November 5, 1961 by Paris W. Reidhead, Pastor.