

"A MIND TO WORK"

"So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof; for the people had a mind to work." Nehemiah 4:6.

Nehemiah was born in exile. In his youth he was appointed by Artaxerxes, king of Persia, to the responsible position of cupbearer. He was brought up in the royal court in the capital at Shushan or Susa. Some of his Jewish brethren, including Hannani, his brother in the flesh, who had escaped captivity, went to visit Nehemiah. He inquired of them concerning his people and their beloved city Jerusalem. With saddened voices they reported that the Jews in Jerusalem were badly afflicted and were in a deplorable condition. They told him that Jerusalem was wasted, its walls broken down and its gates burned with fire, and that the enemy was making life miserable for the people. Upon hearing this report Nehemiah sat down, wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed.

Normally Nehemiah was happy and buoyant. As cup-bearer to the king it was necessary that he reflect a bright and happy outlook. He undoubtedly was an asset to the court because of his contagious smile. So, when he came before the king with a sad countenance, it was so unusual that the king wondered what made him look so unhappy. He inquired why he was sad and requested that he reveal the cause of his trouble.

In contrast to Nehemiah, there are many people to whom the wearing of a smile would occasion inquiry. Anything suggestive of happiness about them would indeed be strange. But the sad countenance, the gloomy spirit, and the pessimistic outlook are incomparable with true faith in God. The notion that gloom is indicative of piety is never obtained from the Bible. Our age certainly needs sunny and joyous and hopeful Christians.

In reply to the inquiry of the king as to the cause of his sadness, Nehemiah told him that Jerusalem was in ruins and his people were suffering. He requested permission to return to his beloved city in order that he might rebuild its walls, restore its gates, and lead in the work of reconstruction. The king granted his request, gave him a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, ordering him to supply timber for the wall, the fortress, and the temple. He also appointed him governor of the province of which Jerusalem was the capital. Armed with these credentials and powers, and stirred with a spirit of patriotism and devotion, Nehemiah went to Jerusalem immediately with a determination to help his brethren.

Nehemiah was willing to undertake even where others had failed. There had been numerous efforts to rehabilitate the Holy City, but all had failed. However, Nehemiah would not be discouraged just because others had failed. He possessed the spirit of tackling the worthwhile job and seeing it through to a successful finish.

Nehemiah had the vision to see a glorious city arising above an ash-heap. When he and his followers arrived in Jerusalem, he meditated for three days before he decided upon a course of action. Man of God that he was, he sought the counsel of the Most High in prayer. Prayer solved his problems and opened the way to success. One night he arose, and with a few friends he went forth secretly to make a personal investigation of the whole situation and discover the real condition of everything. His next step was to call a meeting of the Jewish leaders and inform them about God's leading him to Jerusalem. Then he pictured to them the desolate condition of the once powerful and splendid city, a condition which brought upon it the reproach of all beholders. So ardent was his eloquence and so cogent his argument that the assembly shouted as one man, "Let us rise up and build." This is a fine example of what one person of enthusiasm, courage, and faith can do to inspire many others and lift them out of the Slough of Despond.

It must have been with proud satisfaction that Nehemiah wrote, "So we built the wall." This brief statement is the record of a grandly successful achievement despite discouraging odds and seemingly insurmountable difficulties. But this very task of rebuilding the wall was accomplished within the brief period of fifty-two days. They completed the task notwithstanding: --

1. Sneers. The enemy sneered at: --

- (1) Their character.
"What do these feeble Jews?" said Sanballat.
- (2) Their Motives.
"Will they fortify themselves? Will they sacrifice?"
- (3) Their enthusiasm.
"Will they make an end in a day?"
- (4) Their attempted task.
"Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned?"
- (5) Their completed work.
"Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall," said Tobiah.

The Sanballats and Tobiahs are not all dead yet. Often even today, when you would attempt some new or difficult work for Christ, there are a good many modern Sanballats and Tobiahs ready to stand about and say, "You can't do anything; you are not strong enough; you are not experienced enough; you haven't money enough; the idea of your attempting such a thing!"

2. Active opposition.

After their enemies had mocked them and ridiculed the very idea of their building the wall, they entered into a conspiracy to fight against the work. Their conspiracy expressed itself in bitter and active opposition, but Nehemiah and his people kept right on building. This is another illustration of the fact that a plodding persistence in the face of almost any opposition is sure at last to triumph. The enemy sent Nehemiah an invitation to meet them for a conference. However, he was far too shrewd to be caught thus, and he made the famous answer, "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down." Each time they sent for him he sent back the same reply.

3. Despairing friends.

Some of his men grew discouraged. They were faint hearted. Judah said, "The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, so that we are not able to build the wall." In other words, "What's the use, let's quit." What an inspiration such people are! "It can't be done" had killed many a project that could have been done. The pessimistic "insider" is no less dangerous than the spiteful "outsider." Just a little while before the battle of Yorktown, General Washington was in the darkest period of the long and hard struggle. Friends on every side were despairingly saying, "You can't do it; you might just as well give up." But the great Washington would not let himself despair. Whoever else might, he would not. He would keep at it; and independence was achieved at Yorktown.

Notwithstanding numerous sneers, active opposition, and despairing friends the wall was rebuilt by Nehemiah and his force. The secret of their success is a secret worth our learning. In fact, it is the secret of all true success in Christian service. The essential factors in every successful church are: --

I. An Unshakable Faith in God.

They built the wall by a courageous trust in God. Nehemiah said, "Be not afraid of them; remember the Lord." The taunts and jeers of the enemy only served to make them trust the more implicitly in God. With an unshakable faith in Him, they employed the means at hand and invoked the Divine blessing all the way along.

Nehemiah was an encourager because he was willing for God to have all the glory. An old Jesuit motto reminds us: "A great deal of good can be done in the world if one is not too careful who gets the credit." It was in God that Nehemiah ever found the grace and strength to do his work. It was God who gave him the wise counsel that he was ever so happy to follow. Honest labor and dependence on God never fail. Nehemiah was content just to be a tool in the hands of his God.

II. An Inspiring Leadership.

Nehemiah was the ruling spirit. Dummelow speaks of him as having penetrating shrewdness, perfect simplicity of purpose, persistent prayerfulness, and the most energetic activity. His heart was passionately devoted to the welfare of his beloved Jerusalem. He was not a prophet or a priest or a scribe. He was a layman, a political leader, a plain citizen, and a business man. Of course, he was only one man, but he was one of those men who count for hundreds. He was only one man, but in this world men have not to be counted but weighed; and it is when men are weighed -- weighed as to their intellect, their convictions, their courage, their principles, their self-denial -- that it is seen that one man is not as good as another. The electric power of Nehemiah's patriotic purpose enkindled the hearts of the people with a flame that never expired till the work was done.

Nehemiah was a great leader. He was sent by God; he understood men; he was able to win their confidence; and he was able to win their loyalty. When he put all classes to work he divided the labor, having some to watch while others worked. To each worker he assigned a task for which he was fitted. He was honest and economical in administrative affairs. He inspired the workers with courage and enthusiasm. Nehemiah accomplished his great task because he put first things first and allowed nothing to draw him aside from the thing that God had committed to his hands.

III. A Corps Of Willing Workers.

Nehemiah knew how to do the work and he had been given the authority to do it by the king, but he could have done nothing if the people had not had "a mind to work." He could not have done anything if he had not had a corps of willing workers. They pushed on in the face of unpleasant circumstances because they had been filled with an inspiration to work. It seemed that each worker was willing to do what he could to help. How we need that spirit today in all our churches. Happy is the pastor who has a vision of a real task and who has a people with a "mind to work."

"I would not work my soul to save,
For that the Lord hath done;
But I would work like any slave,
For the sake of God's dear Son."

IV. An Enthusiasm For The Task.

The enthusiasm of the people for the task explains the rapidity with which the work was completed. In all walks of life, especially in the material realm, workers are prompted to effort by the urge of necessity. An important essential, from the human standpoint, of successful service for the kingdom, is a holy enthusiasm for the task. These workers were so enthusiastic because they were each thinking of their homes and loved ones. They were all working for their personal safety, religious liberty, and national honor.

V. A Spirit Of Cooperation.

They worked together. Notice that "we". "So we built the wall." Nehemiah could not have accomplished this remarkable achievement without the cooperation of the people. Real and vital cooperation in church work will be successful. They built the wall by willingness on the part of each to do whatever and all he could. Sometimes they bore burdens; sometimes they grasped swords and spears; sometimes they stood sentinel. There was no selfish picking and choosing. There was no mean declaring, "I will do this, but I won't do that." Each one was ready to do anything; the thing which seemed just then the best thing to be done. Each did his share of the work. It is no wonder that the wall went up steadily. That spirit of cooperation in the work of our church will assure success in the service of our Lord.