

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 one of the greatest patriots the world has ever known. He was born in exile and reared in a foreign land. In his youth he was appointed by Artaxerxes, king of Persia, to the responsible position of cupbearer. A high favorite at the foreign court in the capital at Shushan or Susa, and with everything in the way of wealth and position that heart could desire, Nehemiah's chief thoughts were for his people in their misfortune and humiliation.

Some of Nehemiah's Jewish brethren who had escaped captivity, including Hanani, his brother in the flesh, went to visit him. 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 the city was in a deplorable condition. They told him that Jerusalem was wasted, its walls broken down, its gates burned and that the enemy was making life miserable for the people. Upon hearing this report, Nehemiah "sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven."

Normally Nehemiah was happy and buoyant. As cupbearer to the king it was necessary that he reflect a bright and happy outlook. He was a real asset to the king because of his contagious smile. So, when he appeared before the king with a sad countenance, it was so unusual that the latter wondered what made Nehemiah 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 about them suggestive of happiness would indeed be strange. But the sad countenance, the gloomy spirit and the pessimistic outlook are incompatible with true faith in God. The notion that gloom is indicative of piety is never obtained from the Bible. Our age needs few things more desperately than sunny, 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 greatly. 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 the necessary timber. 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 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. To succeed was not an easy matter. There were many dangers to encounter and numerous difficulties to overcome. There were many enemies to vex and trouble. But Nehemiah would not be discouraged just because others had failed. He would bravely set forth again. He possessed the spirit of tackling the worthwhile job and seeing it through to a successful finish.

Nehemiah had the vision to see a glamorous city arising above an ash-heap. After 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. Through prayer his problems were solved and the way to success was opened to him. One night he and a few friends went forth secretly to make a personal investigation of the whole situation and to discover the real condition of things. 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 splendid and powerful city, 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 vision, faith, courage and enthusiasm 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 built we the wall." This brief statement is the record of a grandly successful achievement despite discouraging odds and seemingly insurmountable difficulties. But this great 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.

Such ridicule was hard to bear and go on with the work, but Nehemiah and the workers turned to the Lord in prayer and labored on. They built the wall in spite of the sneers of Sanballat and Tobiah who picked flaws in the work as it went on. Nehemiah was immune to sarcasm and criticism. He told his followers that rebuilding the wall was the work of God and that He would bless in it, so they went on building and ignored what their enemies said.

All of the Sanballats and Tobiahs are not dead yet. When a new or difficult work for Christ is attempted, there are several modern Sanballats and Tobiahs who will 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!"

The best way to answer criticism is to be oblivious to it. That is the way to have it sputter out. President Calvin Coolidge was up in the Adirondacks one summer when Governor Al Smith of New York paid him a visit. The President and the Governor, in order to have a quiet and undisturbed talk, took a ride in a rowboat with a guide plying the oars. The conversation turned to the reputation President Coolidge had for saying very little. Governor Smith asked him how it worked. "First rate," said Coolidge. "It really isn't necessary to say anything. I have discovered that the average man can tell all he knows in ten minutes, so why interrupt him?"

One of the greatest of Americans could keep his temper when a group of citizens came to him with the tale that his Secretary of War had said, "Lincoln is a fool." That great man simply smiled and said, "Well, Stanton may be right. He often is."

Nehemiah, too, could go on doing his work, regardless of sneers and reproaches, taunts and invectives, hissing and vituperations. Part of that criticism was levelled at Nehemiah from within his own ranks, too, but still he ignored it.

2. Active opposition.

After their enemies had mocked and ridiculed them, they entered into a conspiracy to cause confusion and interfere with the work on the wall. In spite of their active and bitter opposition, Nehemiah and his crew kept right on building. Four times they requested a conference with Nehemiah who persisted in brushing them aside with the famous reply, "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down." He ignored the disgruntled elements and the work progressed in a wonderful way.

3. Despairing friends.

Some of Nehemiah's men grew discouraged. 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." In other words, "What's the use, let's quit." What an inspiration such people are! "It can't be done" has killed many a project that could have been completed. 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.

The secret of their success in rebuilding the wall is worth our learning. It is the secret of all true success in Christian service. The essential factors 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." With an unshakable faith in God, they employed the means at hand and invoked the divine blessing all the way along. Even though the enemy was active, the work went forward, as is always the case where God is in it.

Nehemiah 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." Honest labor and dependence on God never fail. Nehemiah was content just to be a tool in the hands of God. He knew that God was more than equal to every occasion.

II. An Inspiring Leadership.

Nehemiah had penetrating shrewdness, simplicity of purpose, persistent prayerfulness and energetic activity. He was devoted to the welfare of the people in Jerusalem. The 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 man 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.