

"A WORLD IN RUIN NEEDS YOUR AID"

Nehemiah 2:17-18

"Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach. Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work." (Nehemiah 2:17-18)

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary was founded in Greenville, South Carolina, in 1859. Before the first session of the Seminary had ended, Dr. James P. Boyce, the founder and the first president of the school, asked Dr. Basil Manly, Jr., one of the four members of the original faculty, to compose a Seminary hymn, which he did. This hymn, "Soldiers of Christ, In Truth Arrayed," set to a lovely German tune, was sung during the first commencement exercises on May 27, 1860, and has been sung at every subsequent commencement of Southern Seminary.

Although more than one hundred years have passed since this hymn was written, its simple truth and beauty continue to appeal to heart and mind. The words are as follows:

"Soldiers of Christ in truth arrayed
A world in ruins needs your aid;
A world by sin destroyed and dead;
A world for which the Saviour bled.

His Gospel to the world proclaim,
Good news for all in Jesus' name;
Let light upon the darkness break
That sinners from their death may wake.

Morning and evening sow the seed
God's grace the effort shall succeed
Seed times of tears have oft been found
With sheaves of joy and plenty crowned.

We meet to part, but part to meet,
When earthly labors are complete,
To join in yet more blest employ,
In an eternal world of joy."

As he has gone out into his field of service, every graduate of Southern Seminary has heard ringing in his ears this challenge, "A world in ruin needs your aid." These seven words constitute the subject of this sermon. Knowing, as we do, that we are in a world of ruins, torn asunder by war and hatred, cursed and ruined by the tragedy of sin, and now in chaos and confusion, we need to be reminded that the only thing that can really help our world, which is in ruin, is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There are some splendid and helpful lessons which we can learn from Nehemiah, who was one of the truly great characters of the Old Testament and one of the most ardent patriots the world has ever known. You will recall that the Israelites had sinned terribly and tragically. The Northern Kingdom had been defeated and its people carried away. After a period of years, the Southern Kingdom of Judah had fallen and its people taken away into captivity. For a number of years they had lived in a strange land. Nehemiah was among the captives.

In his youth Nehemiah was appointed by Artaxerxes, king of Persia, to the responsible position of cupbearer. This prominent and influential position evidently carried with it a nice salary and considerable prestige. Inasmuch as the king was constantly in

danger of being poisoned by an enemy, it was the duty of the cupbearer to taste the drinks and to sample the food which were served to him, thus insuring his protection from injury or death. Naturally this position demanded the services of one whose character and loyalty were unquestioned.

After Nehemiah had served in this capacity for years, some Jewish brethren, including his own brother, Hanani, went to visit him. Nehemiah inquired of them concerning his people and their beloved city, Jerusalem. With saddened voices they reported that the Jews in Jerusalem were in a miserable and deplorable condition. They informed Nehemiah that Jerusalem was wasted, its walls broken down, its gates burned, its streets filled with rubble and rubbish, and its people living in poverty and misery. Upon hearing this report of the sad plight of his people, Nehemiah was burdened to the point of tears, whereupon he sat down, wept, fasted and prayed. In his earnest prayer this godly man confessed his own sins and the sins of the people, asked for God's forgiveness, and invoked the divine blessings upon them.

Normally Nehemiah was happy and buoyant. As cupbearer to the king it was necessary that he reflect a bright and happy outlook. Because of his contagious smile he was a real asset to the king. 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 as to the cause of his trouble.

Nehemiah explained that he was grieved because Jerusalem was in ruins and his people were suffering. Then, compassionate Nehemiah requested permission to return to his beloved city for the purpose of rebuilding its walls, restoring its gates, and leading 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 for the wall, the fortress, and the temple. He also appointed him governor of the province of which Jerusalem was the capital, and provided a military escort for Nehemiah's protection on his long and perilous journey. Armed with these credentials and powers, and stirred with a spirit of patriotism and devotion, Nehemiah immediately went to Jerusalem with a strong determination to help his brethren, and to do all that he could for their beloved city.

Man of God that he was, Nehemiah sought the counsel of the Most High in prayer. After he had spent three days in meditation in Jerusalem, he arose in the night and, with a few friends, went forth to make a personal, secret, and thorough investigation of the whole situation.

Having discovered the real conditions, Nehemiah called a meeting of the Jewish leaders and disclosed to them how God has led him to Jerusalem, what He had laid upon his heart, what he had discovered, and how he intended to go about changing the prevailing undesirable conditions. So ardent was his eloquence and so cogent was his argument that the assembly shouted, "Let us rise up and build." Thus his program challenged and inspired them to do their best, and elicited the hearty response of all who were associated with him to do all that they could to rebuild the walls of their beloved city. It is truly wonderful when God's children have faith in Him and are united in heart and soul as one man.

Resourceful and courageous Nehemiah never stopped to fret over a bad situation. He simply got busy and tried to change it. The job had to be done, and he knew that God had called him to lead in doing it. He knew how to plan, how to handle people, how to instill in them the desire to cooperate and the willingness to sacrifice, and how to assure them that God would bless them in their work and prosper the undertaking.

Any task which is undertaken for God requires courage and dedication. The rebuilding of the walls around Jerusalem, like every other worthy venture of faith, encountered opposition. Nehemiah and the people had to contend with shrewd and persistent enemies, who did everything possible to hinder and to prevent the reconstruction of the walls. Nehemiah wisely and thoroughly organized groups to work at the arduous task of reconstructing the walls and other groups to be armed to ward off any attack by their enemies. He also assured and con-

vinced the people that they were not in this great work alone, but that God would help them and fight for them. When the conspirators took a good look at the way in which all the people participated in the project, with some doing the construction while others were on guard, they changed their plans, as many others have done through the succeeding centuries.

In Dr. Dana's biography of Dr. L. R. Scarborough, the former and famous president of the Southwestern Baptist Seminary, he relates an incident in the life and ministry of Dr. Scarborough's father, Brother George W. Scarborough. Shortly after he settled in the great west some of the residents of that largely unevangelized and untamed country ordered him not to preach. This warning was conveyed to him in a veiled threat. But undaunted by the sinister warning, the faithful minister walked into his pulpit on the next Sunday morning with his Bible under one arm and his Winchester rifle under the other. When he arose to preach he calmly announced that he expected order in the house during the service. No one present was in the least disposed to challenge his demand. Thereafter the rifle remained at home, but Brother Scarborough preached without interference, for the people of the community were convinced that he meant to maintain his right of free speech.

Sanballat and Tobiah, the major antagonists of the work, who were motivated by jealous animosity, raised their voices in sarcastic laughter, ridiculed the efforts of the people, and mocked at their ability to do such a gigantic task, but their laughter, scorn and ridicule did not thwart or lessen their efforts in the least.

Sanballat sneered at their character, saying, "What do these feeble Jews?"; at their motives, asking, "Will they fortify themselves? Will they sacrifice?"; at their enthusiasm, inquiring, "Will they make an end in a day?"; at their attempted task, saying, "Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned?"; and at their completed work by remarking, "Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall." Ridicule has been a very effective weapon on many occasions, but not in the case of Nehemiah and his fellow-workers. Nehemiah was immune to sarcasm and criticism. Knowing that God wanted the walls rebuilt, and that He would bless them in doing the job, they prayed to God and labored diligently. Unafraid of the threats, unmoved by the mockery, and unashamed by the ridicule heaped upon them, the people continued the work of 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 it; you are not strong enough; you are not experienced enough; you don't have money enough; the idea of your attempting such a thing!"

The best way to answer criticism is to be oblivious to or to ignore 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."

In spite of their active and bitter opposition, Nehemiah and his co-workers kept right on building. They had their hearts in their work and were so earnest about it that they could not be caunted by opposition. They built the wall in the atmosphere of prayer and through the hearty cooperation of all the people. There was a willingness on the part of each to do whatever and all he could. They put first things first and refused to allow anything

to distract their attention and energies from that which God had committed into their hands. They were working for their personal safety, religious liberty and national honor. With an unshakable faith in God, they employed the means at hand and invoked the divine blessing. Even though the enemy was active, the work went forward, as it always the case where God is in it. The opponents of the project were enraged. Nothing so angers the enemies of God as the progress of His work at the hands of His obedient children.

After their enemies had mocked and ridiculed, four times they requested a conference with Nehemiah. Determined to hinder the work, they said, "Come on down and meet with us and let us talk things over." Nehemiah simply brushed them aside with his famous reply, "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down." He refused to waste his time and energy in dealing with these disgruntled critics. He refused to be sidetracked. He was victorious in his mission for God.

Courageous Nehemiah, who trusted God implicitly, and his loyal associates prayed earnestly, worked diligently, and watched carefully until the great project was completed successfully within the brief period of fifty-two days. God always gives the necessary wisdom and strength to His children for the tasks which He assigns to them. It is our responsibility to receive and to use that which He provides in the doing of the job which He wants done, and in the manner which He prescribes. All Christians are responsible for proving their love for the Lord by working diligently and faithfully for Him. When they encounter opposition in so doing, the best procedure for them to follow always is simply to continue receiving orders from the Lord and carrying them out, without being disturbed because of what the critics may say. Make much of your glorious privilege of serving the Lord to the best of your ability with what He has entrusted in your care. God will bless you as you conform to His wishes for your life and work.