

THE POWER OF PURPOSE

Nehemiah 6:3

"I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down" (Nehemiah 6:3).

A medical doctor in the University of Vienna made the statement: "There is nothing in the world which helps a man surmount his difficulties, survive his disasters, keep him healthy and happy, as the knowledge of a life task worthy of his devotion." You cannot advance in life, with any buoyancy, unless you are sure that where you are going has destination, and what you are doing has meaning. It is necessary to have a purpose in life.

In one of his novels George Moore tells of Irish peasants in the period of the great depression being put to work by the government in building roads. For a time the men worked well, sang their Irish songs, and were glad to be back at work again. But little by little they discovered that the roads they were building led nowhere, but just ran out into dreary bogs and stopped. As the truth gradually dawned on them that they had been put to work solely to provide them employment and as an excuse for feeding them, the men grew listless, and stopped singing. Commenting on the incident, Moore said: "The roads to nowhere are difficult to make. For a man to work well and sing, there must be an end in view."

With these two comments in mind, we shall turn again for inspiration to the wonderful story of Nehemiah rebuilding the broken walls of Jerusalem. In the spiritual lessons which it teaches, the little book of Nehemiah is a gem. It tells how, after wearying delays, the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt by the repatriated Jewish "remnant," under the virile leadership of Nehemiah. In this book, the man and the story are wedded inseparably to each other. How different the story might have been if that huge burden and hazard had fallen to a man of different caliber from Nehemiah! If ever a crisis hour were matched by man, it was so in that rebuilding episode.

Evidently Nehemiah was reared in exile, and in his youth or early manhood was appointed by Artaxerxes, the king of Persia, to the lucrative and responsible position of royal cupbearer. This prominent position carried with it considerable prestige, as well as a large salary. 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 sample the food which were to be 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.

One day, while Nehemiah was in attendance at the royal court, his brother, Hanani, and a group of Jews went to visit him. When Nehemiah inquired of them concerning his people and their beloved city, Jerusalem, 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; whereupon he sat down, wept, fasted, and prayed. 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.

Nehemiah's grief and fasting so altered his appearance in four months that Artaxerxes asked what was wrong. With humble courtesy Nehemiah explained that he was grieved because Jerusalem was in ruins and his people were suffering. He 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. It seemed such a difficult task with the walls in ruins, the people scattered, and everyone discouraged and despondent. All around were the enemies, who were doing everything in their power to prevent

Jerusalem from becoming strong again. 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. The enemies tried ridicule first, then persuasion, then they put their heads together and plotted, while Nehemiah went right on as though he didn't know they were there. Four times the demand went up, and four times the answer came back: "I am doing a great work, and I cannot come down."

Purpose is the only thing that will hold up anybody, wholehearted devotion to a purpose that is worthwhile. It is so refreshing to find a man so caught in the grip of a high purpose that no obstacle can discourage him, no criticism can distract him, and no side issue can pull him away. Can't you get something out of that to help you in your own pilgrimage? The power of a purpose—"I am doing a great work, and I cannot come down." So many things we can't come down to when we are caught up in the lifting, steady power of purpose.

Let us start on the lowest rung of the ladder—the power of purpose to lift us above the common fear of criticism. We are all vulnerable to that, exceedingly sensitive to social approval, and aware of a terrific pressure toward conformity. No one can get far in the Christian life, nor in his commitment to any worthwhile purpose, without running into what Nehemiah had to deal with, the envious ridicule of lesser men. There seems to be an unwritten commandment in every society: Thou shalt not put thy head above the heads of others even a little. If thou dost, thou shalt become the target of the envious, the suspicious, and the malicious.

Mediocrity resents excellence. A clean life is a rebuke to a soiled society. Dean Swift said, "Censure is the tax one pays to the public for being eminent." It is important that we understand that. Begin to be a little better than others and you will pay the tax on it. Don't imagine that you can stand taller or cleaner than the others and not get sniped at or splashed.

Nehemiah had the perfect answer to it. He said, "I am doing a great work, and I can't come down." When a person has found his task, knows in his heart what he must say and do and be, he is pretty well immune from either the praise or the blame of men. Whether the crowd around him is flinging bouquets or splashing mud, it will make little difference. He is doing his work and he can't come down. Nehemiah said, in substance, "never mind the snipers. Let's get on with the work." You just can't afford to come down and get involved with them.

Perhaps no man in American history mastered this particular art as did Abraham Lincoln. He realized he had many bitter enemies. They slandered him and lied about him unmercifully. But he had early learned the folly of nursing grudges. His great work was to save the Union. And like Nehemiah, he could not come down. Once when an attack was made on him for a supposed blunder in the conduct of the war, and an officer held in his hand official evidence that the slander was completely unfounded and begged the President to permit him to release the facts, he said, "Oh, no, at least not now." And then he went on: "If I were to try to read, much less answer, all the attacks made on me, this office might as well be closed for any other business. I do the very best I can, and I mean to keep doing it so to the end. And if the end brings me out wrong, ten angels swearing I was right would make no difference." It is little wonder that we look up to Lincoln! Like Nehemiah, he could not come down.

Let us go on, now, to a more important phase of the matter, the power of purpose to lift us above futility, the scattering of our powers in aimless, pointless existence.

Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost was in part aimed at that. Peter proclaimed Christ as the Saviour and center of life, and urged his hearers to accept Him as Lord of life and thus save themselves from "this untoward generation." And that is an unusual word—"untoward." We don't use it in our modern speech. It means "not going toward anything," going this way and that without direction or motivation, running around in circles, going nowhere. Untoward means not going toward anything.

It is an almost perfect description of what life has come to mean for millions—meaninglessness; men and women who, without a Saviour or a center, are living an endless round of nothingness—going, going fast, but not going toward anything. For some it is a sort of dreary treadmill, eking out a living. This is a malady of our time, the deep sickness. What flattens life for millions is its meaninglessness, its emptiness of purpose, not going toward anything.

The Rockefeller Foundation Report On Education contained this statement: "What most people want, young and old, is not merely security or comfort or luxury, although they are glad enough to have these. Most of all, people want meaning in their lives—meaning, mission, purpose." After a preaching mission in colleges and universities, E. Stanley Jones said this about our present generation of American youth: "They are taller in body, better trained in mind, more wholesome in attitude; but they lack one great essential: a sense of mission, no great, compelling purpose to lift them to their feet—not going toward anything."

The New Testament urges us to be saved from aimlessness, to get ourselves organized around some purpose, to get the scattered forces of our being linked up with the creative purposes of God. That is what it means to be saved and made whole. In fact, the word "salvation" itself in its derivation means making whole that which is split. When some people say they are going to pieces, they are speaking the literal truth. Life can go all to pieces in aimlessness. What we deeply need in our lives is some master passion, some supreme devotion to hold our scattered selves together. Our loyalties have a curious way of depending on some higher loyalty to pull them together and give them meaning. Nehemiah had found the answer to aimlessness. "I am doing a great work, and I can't come down." That is, he had put his hand to a task that God wanted done. And while with him, as with others, one day followed another day, there was meaning running through his life because he was going toward something worth reaching.

Part of the enormous contribution that Christ makes to human life is this: He saves us from the sin of scattered, aimless living. He calls us to a great task, a great enterprise worthy of our complete devotion. He puts divine meaning into our small and human tasks. So, when we urge people to accept Christ the Saviour, we are not thinking so much of what a man may do for the cause of Christ, but of what Christ may do for the man. To be a committed servant of Christ is to be saved from a scattered, meaningless, aimless life.

Finally, let us consider the power of purpose to keep us above discouragement. How does a person keep hope alive in a time of deep disheartenment, as Nehemiah did in that seemingly hopeless task of his, day by day rebuilding broken walls when nobody believed that anything much could come of it? This is the practical question of our generation. Good men in all lands are asking it, how to keep faith in the imperishable values when they seem so completely at the mercy of the perishable. Our age is characterized by a deep, subconscious pessimism and underlying mood of hopelessness. Gone from our hearts is the buoyant optimism of the frontier days which was so exhilarating a factor in the

making of America. It is our fate to live in a time when a vast instability and insecurity and anxiety underlies all we think or do. Emotionally we are like people waiting for a catastrophe. A "what's the use of anything" mood has settled down on millions like a blight. You see it in the hesitation of young people to go into specialized training for the professions. They say "what's the use of starting long courses for medicine or the ministry, when you are likely to get yanked out for military interruption that may be permanent and final?" You note this mood in the atmosphere, the day-by-day chronicles of depressing news in the headlines. Gloom is contagious, pessimism is catching, fear leaps from heart to heart like an epidemic; and fed through all these modern media of propaganda, a whole generation can be emotionally conditioned at once.

Here we are as Christians, compelled to live our lives, bear our witness, in an age drenched with hopelessness and discouragement about the future. And while it would be utterly unrealistic to deny or ignore the very real dangers and disasters that produce the mood, we know that we must not come down to it. Pessimism does not win any battles. Discouragement does not have any song. We are the people with a faith, and we know that this mood of hopelessness, which has settled down in our generation, has come, in large part, from the abandonment of faith in the sovereignty of God and His purpose in human history.

George Moore was right. It is the roads to nowhere that are hard to build. There is an unmistakable connection between this generation's skepticism and its pessimism. What takes the heart out of people is not the problems we face. We can tackle anything as long as we believe that life has ultimate meaning. What takes the heart right out of men is the conviction that life does not have any meaning, and therefore what we do is without any enduring worth. "The roads to nowhere are hard to make." For men to work well and have joy, there must be an end in view.

That is why Nehemiah and others like him stand up among us as great, towering bulwarks of strength and inspiration. They, too, lived in times of discouragement, in darker gloom than ours. But they did not come down to it. They were held up by a purpose, God's eternal purpose, and their hands were on part of it to make God's purpose come true. Remember there is a vital connection between hope and the hand. People who are at work in the firing line are incurably hopeful. That ought to mean something. The pessimistic ones are mostly people who sit around discussing the problems. It is easy to think that the world is hopeless when we are not doing one thing to make it otherwise. You know that from your own experience. You sit around and brood about your problems. You can get as blue as Elijah. But get up, put your hand on a task, start going toward something, and see how quickly the mood will vanish. There is a definite connection between a man's hand and his hope.

There is excitement in it--having some part in making the task come out right. I commend it to you. It is glorious to see a man with his hand on a task, having some part in making God's story come out right, so caught in a great purpose that no obstacle could discourage him, no criticism distract him, and no side issue pull him away.

"I am doing a great work, and I cannot come down."