

Synthetic Bible Studies

Containing an outline study of every book of the Bible
with suggestions for Sermons, Addresses and
Bible Expositions

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LESSON THIRTY-SEVEN

NEHEMIAH AND MALACHI

Nehemiah

In the chronological order Nehemiah follows Ezra, and perhaps one ought to say Haggai and Zechariah also, after a period of about ten years, and although a Jew, he is an official of influence in the court of Persia, and one of those who did not return with either the company of Zerubbabel or the later one under the leadership of Ezra. Some of the returned captives, among them his brother Hanani, are revisiting Persia at the time when the book opens, from whom he learns that the condition of the people in the Holy Land is one of "**affliction and reproach**" (1:1-3).

Nehemiah's heart is moved by the intelligence, and like a true Israelite and true child of GOD he brings the matter before Him. The prayer that follows and which is the substance of the remainder of chapter one, is one of the many supplications of saints in the Old Testament which will repay the closest attention from both the historical and devotional point of view. The prayer was very definite and pointed and met with an early and favorable answer, one which it may be said Nehemiah himself helped to bring about (2:1-8).

Arrived on the site of Jerusalem with his commission and authority as governor and repairer of the breaches, Nehemiah makes a quiet and personal investigation of the condition of the walls before he reports his plans and purposes to the leaders of the people; but when he does so they

are ready to engage in the work (2:9-18).

This work, let it be remembered, was the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, not the rebuilding of the Temple, which, as you recall, was undertaken and carried through successfully in the days of Zerubbabel, who was aided by the prophesying of Zechariah and Haggai. But though the Temple was rebuilt, yet the defenseless condition of the city in consequence of the broken walls, left the Jews at the mercy of every enemy, not a few of whom were adjacent to them and ready to take every opportunity of injuring them.

The rebuilding of the walls, therefore, was important as resulting in that reestablishment of their national autonomy which up until Nehemiah's time they had never really been able to enjoy. Of course when we speak of "national autonomy" the phrase is always qualified by the understanding that they were subject nevertheless at this time to Persia, although with a large measure of political freedom.

Some of these enemies spoken of above did everything in their power to frustrate the plans of Nehemiah and the people, by ridicule, by craft, by conspiracy as well as in other ways, but without avail.

Nehemiah was a most remarkable man.

One of the rarest discretion, courage, patriotism, pertinacity and leadership. But he was above all a man of GOD, knowing GOD, thoroughly consecrated to GOD, and of course specially equipped not only intellectually, but spiritually, for the great task before him. It was simply impossible under the circumstances for him to be overcome, and there is a sense to which his career entitles him to be ranked with the chiefest men of Israel, with Moses, David, Elijah, Daniel and others that might be named.

There is a picturesqueness also about his personal history which gives it a rare charm to the student of sacred biography.

Chapter 2:19, 20, chapter 4, and chapter 6 are particularly interesting as covering the subjects above named.

Chapter 3 gives us the names and order of those that built the wall under his leadership, and chapter 5 furnishes us with a picture of the inner life of the people at this time, which is as dishonoring to those whom we might call the rich men and capitalists, as it is honoring to both the head and the heart of the great man who was the responsible chief of affairs.

Chapter 7 indicates that after the completion of the walls, Nehemiah returned to his former position at the court of Persia from which apparently he merely had a leave of absence (7:1-4). This return, however, was not undertaken until other things besides the walls had been set in order. The law against usury spoken of in chapter 5 was not the only important piece of legislation established on a sure footing. The renewal of the genealogical records (chap. 7) was of vital moment as pertaining to the redistribution of the land and the succession of the high priest, as well as looking forward to the identification of the Messiah as the King of Israel when He should come. The revival of something of the old-time religion through the reading of the law and the formal renewal of the covenant was another event of magnitude due to Nehemiah's

authority and influence (chap. 8). The succeeding chapters down to and including chapter 12 refer to these events.

But at chapter 13 (especially v. 6), we perceive that after an interval Nehemiah returns again to Jerusalem. Verse 6 of that chapter indicates that about twelve years more or less were consumed in the execution of his first commission, but just how long a period elapsed between his report to the King of Persia and his later visit to Jerusalem is not stated. Nevertheless on his return he finds a condition of affairs to some extent not unlike that Ezra was obliged to rebuke on his earlier entrance upon the governorship.

In the first place the worship of the Lord had been sadly neglected and the Temple polluted by the heathen through the willful and selfish connivance even of the high priest.

The service was not maintained because the Levites were not supported by the tithes and offerings.

The Sabbath day was desecrated most outrageously, and the earlier sin of intermarrying with the heathen had been fallen into again notwithstanding the previous solemn covenant against it.

Nehemiah's conduct in dealing with these sins and bringing about reforms as narrated in this chapter is about the raciest reading in the Old Testament, and while I am not an enthusiastic admirer of "political preaching" in the pulpit, yet any minister who wants good texts and stirring illustrations for use against dereliction in public office and the encouragement of fidelity and boldness on the part of public servants, will find a rich feast in this the last chapter of Nehemiah.

Malachi

The book of the prophet Malachi is a continuous discourse, so that, properly speaking, there are no intervening events.

The prophet is usually regarded as a contemporary of Nehemiah, following closely in the wake of the former prophets Zechariah and Haggai.

The evidence of this, however, is chiefly internal and gathered from two facts:

- (1) that the second Temple was very evidently in existence at the time, and
- (2) that the evils condemned by Nehemiah and singled out above, are those which he also condemns.

This will appear more particularly as we proceed, but those who care to do so at this time may compare the language in Malachi 1:7, 8; 2:11-16; 3:8-10 with the last chapter of Nehemiah, especially verses 10-14, 23-29.

Following an outline suggested by Professor Willis J. Beecher, D.D., we have:

Introduction to the Book, 1:5

- what word in verse 1 indicates that the message, or messages, to follow are in the nature of rebuke rather than comfort or encouragement?
- with what touching and all-comprehensive declaration does verse 3 begin?
- while the Lord thus declares Himself towards His people Israel, how do they receive it?

This skeptical insinuation in the interrogation "**Wherein hast thou loved us?**" is a marked peculiarity of the book, and shows the people to have been in a very bad spiritual frame, and one well calculated to give birth to the practical sins enumerated later on. It is so hard for man in his natural state to believe that in the midst of trials and discipline of one kind and another it is possible for him to be the object of divine love. For example, how blind were these Israelites concerning it, and with what historic circumstances, which it would seem impossible to have been forgotten by them, does the Lord seek to bring them to a saner mind (vv. 2-5)?

Let us be careful not to read a wrong meaning or intention into that reference to Esau, as though GOD caused him to be born simply to have an object on which He might exercise His hate, or as if that hate condemned the individual Esau to misery in this life and eternal torment beyond.

The hate of Esau as an individual is simply set over against the special choice of Jacob as the heir to the promised seed of Abraham.

Esau did not inherit that promise, the blessing to the world did not come down in his line, but that of his brother Jacob, and yet Esau himself had a prosperous and doubtless enjoyable life, nor are we driven to the conclusion by anything the Bible says that he was eternally lost any more than Jacob.

Moreover, the particular reference in this case is not so much to Esau as a man as to the national descendants of Esau, the Edomites, who had not only been carried into captivity as Israel had been, but whose efforts to rebuild their waste places would not be successful as in the case of Israel, because the divine purposes of grace lay in another direction.

Second Division of the Book, 1:6-3:4

This division consists of an address to the priests and Levites, more especially the former, in which they are charged with three kinds of offenses.

The first offense is the neglect of their Temple duties (1:6-2:9).

Circumstances prevent our enlarging on the subject, but the real character of the offense is seen in verses 7, 8, 12 and 13 of chapter 1, while the punishment to fall upon the offenders in the event of impenitence is indicated in 2:1-9.

The second offense concerns unholy marriages, covering verses 10-16 of chapter 2.

It was for this sin as well as the preceding one that the Lord had refused to accept their offerings (vv. 13, 14). Notice, in this connection, the strong argument against divorce found in verse 15. GOD made one wife for one man at the beginning though He had the power to make more, and He did this because of the Godly seed He desired.

The third offense is that of skepticism, and as Professor Beecher calls it, a bad skepticism, for there is a species of doubt which only deserves very tender and compassionate treatment and which cannot be called evil in its spirit and motive. This, however, is hardly the kind of doubt now under consideration (2:17).

This division of the book closes, as does indeed the division following, by a prediction "concerning a day in which the obedient and disobedient shall be differentiated and rewarded." This "day" we have often recognized as the "**day of the Lord**" still in the future both for Israel and the Gentile nations (3:1-4).

Notice the partial or introductory fulfillment of verse 1 in the career of John the Baptist, as indicated in the words and context of Matthew 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 1:76. But the concluding verses of the prediction show very clearly to those familiar with prophetic teaching, that a complete fulfillment must be ahead. The offering of Judah and Jerusalem has not yet been so purified by divine judgment as to be pleasant unto the Lord as in the days of old, but it shall yet so come to pass.

Third Division of the Book, 3:5-4:3

This division consists of an address to the people as a whole, who like the priests, are charged with three kinds of offenses.

The first offense is certain public wrongs in which are grouped false swearing, adultery, oppression and injustice (3:5-7).

The second is the sin of failure to support the Temple and its ministers (3:8-12), in which case please notice the solemn charge of divine robbery, and the overflowing blessing promised to faithfulness in the matter of tithes.

The third is the same kind of skepticism as with the priests (3:13-15).

The prediction concluding this section covers 3:16-4:3, and is rather more comforting in character than the preceding one.

Fourth Division of the Book, 4:4-6

This division is in the nature of a grand conclusion to the whole in which the great day of the Lord is once more referred to, and Elijah the prophet named as His forerunner.

We learn from the New Testament (Matthew 11:14; Mark 9:11, and Luke 1:17) that John the Baptist is to be considered at least as the type of this forerunner. but that Elijah is himself to come again to this earth is the opinion of very many, to do the work here predicted of him.

There are those who believe that he and Moses are the two witnesses spoken of in Revelation 11 that shall appear and do wonders in Jerusalem during the period of the reign of the Antichrist.

It is particularly to be noted in this day when false Elijahs are boasting of themselves, that the true Elijah, when he comes, will be a Jew, that his mission will be entirely to Jews, and that his place of operations will not be in the United States, for example. but in Jerusalem and Judea. He will be a prophet, moreover, and not engaged in business transactions either commercial or industrial. Neither will he be interested in the purchase or sale of real estate.

There is only one Zion and that is in Jerusalem, and the Lord will never commission any of His people to purchase that with earthly gold from the hand of His enemies. It belongs to Him and by Him was given in trust to Israel long ago. Through their disobedience they have lost its possession temporarily, but when on their repentance they shall be prepared to receive it again at His hands, He will wrest it from the nations now trampling it under foot, and give it back to them again.

~ end of Old Testament Lessons ~
