

Sabbath School Lesson #2 – Nehemiah – 5-11 October 2019

Christ would have us learn from Nehemiah's conduct: "And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned *certain* days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven, And said, I beseech Thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love Him and observe His commandments: Let Thine ear now be attentive, and Thine eyes open, that Thou mayest hear the prayer of Thy servant, which I pray before Thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel Thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against Thee: both I and my father's house have sinned" (Nehemiah 1:4-6).

There are a number of lessons we learn from the conduct of Nehemiah, we mention here a few. Keeping in mind that the prophet of old were led by the Spirit of Christ (1 Peter 1:10-11), we can say that Nehemiah lived a Christian life amid his busy employment in the king's palace. It is a lesson we need to learn. The great question that has always confronted man is, How can I live a Christian life in the midst of the rush and bustle of the world? Too often it has been given out as unanswerable. Most people have thought, and still think, that it is impossible. So they have not attempted to be Christians, or have put it off until they could retire from the world and live a sort of hermit life. Still others have thought that there must be a different standard for one living in the thick of the busy world, from that for those who live in comparative solitude. Every such idea is a mistaken one. While the example of Christ with His disciples shows that it is right and necessary for one to have seasons of retirement, it is a fact that He made no provision for any such class as monks or hermits. To the Father He said of His disciples: "I pray not that Thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldst keep them from the evil" (John 17:15). His people are to be the light of the world; and the object of a light is to shine in the midst of the darkness. They are to be the salt of the earth, which means that they are to come in contact with those who need saving. Salt that has to be kept shut up in a box and carefully kept from coming in contact with any perishable substance, lest it lose its savour, might as well be thrown away at once. So the religion that has to be kept in a cell, in order that it be not lost, is not worth preserving.

In short, the Christian is not to live for self, but for others. He is to preserve his Christianity by putting it to active service. Thus it was with Nehemiah in the palace of king Artaxerxes, in the midst of the cares of a great people. What was his secret? Nehemiah walked with God, and could be alone with Him even in the midst of a crowd. Nehemiah was a cup-bearer to Artaxerxes, king of Persia. As he served the king his heart was heavy because of the condition of Jerusalem. The king learned the cause of the trouble, and asked him what he wanted; and while the cup was in his hand, before replying to the king, he "prayed to the God of heaven" (see Nehemiah 2:1-5). It is the presence of the Lord that makes every place sacred, for He Himself is a sanctuary for His people, and we need not lose Him in the crowd. If you know it, you may sing the words of the SDAH 455: "The healing of the seamless dress Is by our beds of pain; We touch Him in life's throng and press, And we are whole again."

True Christianity, will survive all lawful contact with the darkness of the world. Christ's prayer was, "I pray not that Thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldst keep them from the evil" (John 17:15). Joseph in the house of Potiphar, Nehemiah in the court of Artaxerxes, Daniel and his three friends in the palace of the king of Babylon, are shining examples of saints in the midst of the worst kind of heathenism. When Christ shall come the second time, it will be "to be glorified in all his saints" (2 Thessalonians 1:10). But He will be glorified in all those who believe on Him, for all His people are to be changed, and "fashioned like unto His glorious body" (Philippians 3:21). Therefore all who believe in Christ are His saints. A saint is one who is sanctified, and Christ is the sanctified heir of all that believe. He "of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30). Christ is not divided. He is not one thing to one person, and another thing to another person. All that He is to one, He is to all. God is no respecter of persons, and therefore He has no special favourites among His children. Christ's prayer for all who should believe on Him, was "that the world may know that Thou hast sent Me, and hast loved them, as Thou hast loved Me" (John 17:23). A possibility for all, to which all are

called, as shown by the inspired prayer: "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He that calleth you, who also will do it" (1 Thess. 5:23-24).

We turn to comments on Nehemiah by Ellen White. Nehemiah was troubled by the bad news that Jerusalem, a place the God of his fathers is worshipped, lay in ruins. We are told: "Four months he was compelled to wait for a favorable opportunity to present his request to the king. During this period, while his heart was oppressed with grief, he constantly endeavored to carry a cheerful and happy countenance. In his seasons of retirement, many were the prayers, the penitential confessions, and the tears of anguish, witnessed by God and angels; but all this was concealed from human sight. The regulations of Eastern courts forbade any manifestation of sorrow within them. All must appear gay and happy in those halls of luxury and splendor. The distress without was not to cast its shadow in the presence of royalty" {ST Nov 29, 1883, par. 7}. "But at last the sorrow that burdened Nehemiah's heart could no longer be concealed. Sleepless nights devoted to earnest prayer, care-filled days, dark with the shadow of hope deferred, leave their trace upon his countenance. The keen eye of the monarch, jealous to guard his own safety, is accustomed to read countenances and to penetrate disguises. Seeing that some secret trouble is preying upon his servant, he suddenly inquires, 'Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart'" {ST Nov 29, 1883, par. 8}. "This question fills the listener with apprehension. Will not the king be angry to hear that while outwardly engaged in his service, the courtier's thoughts have been far away with his afflicted people? Will not the offender's life be forfeited? And his cherished plan for restoring the strength of Jerusalem—is it not about to be overthrown? 'Then,' he says, 'I was very sore afraid.' With trembling lips and tearful eyes he reveals the cause of his sorrow,— the city, which is the place of his father's sepulcher, lying waste, and its gates consumed with fire. The touching recital awakens the sympathy of the monarch without arousing his idolatrous prejudices; another question gives the opportunity which Nehemiah has long sought: 'For what dost thou make request?' But the man of God does not reply until he has first asked the support of One higher than Artaxerxes. 'I prayed," he says, 'to the God of Heaven'" {ST November 29, 1883, par. 9}.

"A precious lesson is this for all Christians. Whenever we are brought into positions of difficulty or danger, even when surrounded by those who love and fear not God, the heart may send up its cry for help, and there is One who has promised that he will come to our aid. This is the kind of prayer that Christ meant when he said, 'Pray without ceasing.' We are not to make ejaculatory prayer a substitute for public or family worship, or for secret devotion; but it is a blessed resource, at our command under circumstances when other forms of prayer may be impossible. Toilers in the busy marts of trade, crowded and almost overwhelmed with financial perplexities, travelers by sea and land, when threatened by some great danger, can thus commit themselves to divine guidance and protection. And in every circumstance and condition of life, the soul weighed down with grief or care, or assailed by temptation, may thus find comfort, support, and succor in the unfailing love and power of a covenant-keeping God" {ST Nov 29, 1883, par. 10}. "Nehemiah and Artaxerxes stand face to face, — the one a servant, of a down-trodden race, the other the monarch of the world's great empire. But infinitely greater than the disparity of rank is the moral distance which separates them. Nehemiah has complied with the invitation of the King of kings, 'Let him take hold of my strength, that he may make peace with me, and he shall make peace with me.' He has enlisted in his behalf a power in whose hand is the heart of kings, even as the rivers of water, and who 'turneth it whithersoever he will.' The silent petition sent up to Heaven was the same that he had offered for many weeks, that God would prosper his request. And now taking courage at the thought that he has a Friend, omniscient and all-powerful, to work in his behalf, the man of God calmly makes known to the king his desire to be released for a time from his office at the court, and be authorized to build up the waste places of Jerusalem, and to make it once more a strong and defended city. Momentous results to the Jewish city and nation hung upon this request. And, says, Nehemiah, 'the king granted me according to the good hand of my God upon me'" {ST Nov 29, 1883, par. 11}.

Nehemiah exemplifies living a true Christian life amid the darkness prevailing in the world.