

H. L. Rossier

**Comments on
the book of Nehemiah**

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Introduction

The book of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah does not immediately follow the book of Ezra. It begins in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (Longimanus), that is to say thirteen years after the arrival of Ezra at Jerusalem (cf. Ezra 7:7): an arrival which resulted in the events related in Ezra 7 to 10. During these thirteen years, the "Jews that had escaped" had fallen into reproach and great misery. It is true that the temple had been rebuilt, but, in a city with no defense, these poor Jews who had escaped were in constant danger of falling under the attacks of their enemies, and the house of God, which was the great object of their concern, was in danger of being plundered anew.

The account of Nehemiah embraces a period of about twelve years. It treats another subject and consequently it has another bearing than the book of Ezra. In the book of Ezra we see the altar re-established in its place, the foundations of the temple laid, the house itself built, and all this work followed by the purification of the people from their profane alliances. Thus,

the object of this book is the service of worship of the people of God and the moral state which must accompany it. On the other hand, the book of Nehemiah speaks of the restoration of the walls, the gates and the dwelling places of Jerusalem. Thus, while Ezra presents the restoration of Judah and Benjamin from the religious point of view, Nehemiah speaks from the civil point of view and in the course of these meditation we will consider the bearing of this restoration for ourselves.

Here we do not see, as in the book of Ezra, a Zerubbabel or a Jeshua, a governor of royal descent and a high priest, set at the head of the people in order to lead them, nor do we see prophets to re-awaken them, nor even a scribe of the priestly line, like Ezra, sent to remind them of the law of Moses and to purify them. No doubt, this scribe himself, as invested by the king, has the upper hand over the civil power, but only because of the confidence which his moral character inspires (Ezra 7:25); and if he has the right to exercise this authority, this is not what he seeks. All his attention and all his zeal are directed

toward the spiritual condition of the people, for whom the house of God has become their center.

Nehemiah is not a man of rank or authority; as we have just said, he was invested with his functions only because of the confidence with which he inspired the king, whom he serves as his chief cup-bearer. In virtue of this confidence (but under the governing hand of God who directs all things, even human sentiments,) the king gives Nehemiah his mission and grants him the title of Tirshatha, that is to say, of governor.

As we have seen in the book of Ezra, the character of the people was that of a remnant according to God. Then, after a period of discouragement, the revival occurred, and lastly their moral restoration by means of the Scriptures. Nehemiah presents a different picture to us. In every way, the condition of the people was very low, whether considered morally or outwardly; and so, faced with this misery, the opposition of the enemy is apparently insurmountable, and all the more so as his wiles are many and varied. Only the grace of God could remedy these things, but the instruments which He would use must

be armed with patience, perseverance and energy. These are precisely the characteristics manifested by Nehemiah.

But let us turn to the study of this book, without further preamble.

Chapter 1

Nehemiah's Mission

Nehemiah was at Shushan, the court of that same Artaxerxes, king of Persia, who had protected Ezra, when he returned from Babylon to Jerusalem. One of Nehemiah's brothers and several men who had come with him from Judah brought news to Nehemiah at Shushan concerning "the Jews that had escaped" who settled in the "province" beyond the river (that is to say, in the land of Israel) with details about the miserable condition of the holy city. He is deeply afflicted by what he learns concerning the misery and reproach of the people, and the ruins of the city with its broken walls. After being restored, this weak remnant was continually threatened with becoming the prey of en-

emies conspiring to destroy them. They had not yet, by their own fault, established anything lasting. What had the men of Judah done during such a long lapse of years? Once they had the energy to purify themselves from evil, but now they lacked the energy to preserve themselves. What would become of them now? Ezra had foreseen that the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem was necessarily the next step after the construction of the temple, if the people would continue in the spirit of the revival (Ezra 9:9); but this had not been the case. Long years had passed by without any event indicating activity or energy; there was nothing, except increasing affliction and reproach.

When Nehemiah hears these things, like Ezra and like all men of God in a day of ruin, he deeply humbles himself: "I sat and wept, and mourned for days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of the heavens" (v. 4); although he did not do so on account of a positive sin as Ezra did (Ezra 9), but rather, on account of the misery the people had brought upon themselves through their lack of perseverance and trust in God. Nehemiah

begins by acknowledging the faithfulness of God toward those who obey Him, then he confesses the sins of Israel against God, without in any way excluding his own sins or the sins of his father's house, or their common disobedience to His Word (v. 5-7). But although God had given warnings and had carried them out, according to what He had said to Moses (Deut. 28:64), He also had given promises, in the event that the people should return to a condition of obedience, saying that He would gather them together and bring them back to the land. This had actually occurred (Deut. 30:1-6), and Nehemiah then pleads the cause of the restored people; they were now servants of the Lord. Would the Lord disown them? Impossible. Nehemiah was a servant of the Lord also. How could God fail to hear him? Nehemiah identifies the people with himself in service, conscious that he must continue the work; he ardently desires to do so, knowing that he is in communion with the will of God, from the moment when He had restored these escaped Jews from among His people. But at the same time (and this is what we find in all men of faith — including Zerubbabel, Ezra, Daniel and others — in the midst of the ruin of the people), Ne-

hemiah does not attempt to throw off the yoke of the nations, for this would mean failing to take the unfaithfulness of the people into account before God. He merely asks God to "grant him mercy on the sight of this man" (v. 11). This is how he calls the king when he speaks to God, for what else is he to the Sovereign God who directs the heart of the most exalted and powerful men, in order to cause them to carry out His plans? When he stands before the king, Nehemiah changes his language and honors him as is becoming (Neh. 2:3), but, before God, he gives honor and power to Him alone.

Chapter 2 to 7

The Civil State of the People

Chapter 2

Nehemiah leaves for Jerusalem and inspects the grounds.

In the month of Nisan (which was the first month, the same as the month of Abib when the Passover was celebrated, and which formed part, along with the ninth month of Chislew, of the twentieth year of Artaxerxes), Nehemiah give wine to the king, in the course of his duties as cup-bearer. His prayer (Neh. 1:11) was answered, after he had "mourned for days", that is to say, about four months. Fasting and sorrow had left their imprint on his face; now, it was not permitted to appear before the king with a sorrowful face (Dan. 1:10, where the Hebrew word translated "worse liking" may also be translated "sad"); but God used this very thing in order to put words into the king's mouth which would afford an occasion for Nehemiah's request. Such miracles, in answer to our prayers, are part of the daily

circumstances of our Christian life, so completely that we hardly take notice of it. Considering things carefully, everything is a miracle in God's ways toward us. He diverts certain dangers, procures certain encounters, prevents others, gives us certain opportunities and closes certain paths to us: in a word, His hand is at work everywhere in order to carry out His ways of grace toward the believer or through him. This was the case with Nehemiah: "This is nothing else but sadness of heart", the king says to him. Nehemiah, trembling all over, perhaps not yet seeing the desired answer to his prayer, makes his request, but not without first mentally praying once again to the God of the heavens* that his request may correspond to God's mind, Then he immediately mentions the subject of the ruin of the city and its gates: "Why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lies waste, and its gates are consumed with fire?" (v. 3). Then he asks to be sent to Judah in order to build Jerusalem. "When wilt thou return?" the king asks him. Nehemiah "set him a time", probably twelve years (see Neh. 2:1; 13:6).

- * "The God of the heavens" is the name of God, mentioned continually in Ezra and Nehemiah, as the One who had given dominion to the Gentiles. He is no longer called the God of the earth, for, after He had given the land to His people in His character as God of the earth, and after His people had been declared Lo-ammi, on account of their unfaithfulness, God had abandoned this title which He will not take up again until later. (See Ezra; Dan. 2:18-19, 28, 37, 44)

Notice an important difference between Ezra and Nehemiah, which nevertheless does not throw any blame on Nehemiah. In Ezra, faith alone is active: "[He was] ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help [him] against the enemy in the way" (Ezra 8:22). On the contrary, Nehemiah recommends himself to the protection of the governors on the other side of the river and does not oppose the king's proposition that his army captains and horsemen should escort him there (Neh. 2:7, 9). He acknowledges the support of the protective power which he serves, not because of any lack of faith, but because, in these low times, faith does not manifest itself with the same simplicity. When the temple was completed,

Ezra had only to carry gifts to the house of the Lord. The greater the treasure confided to him, the more necessary it was to show the world that faith turned to God to keep that which belonged to Him. Nothing of this kind took place in the case of Nehemiah; here it was not a matter of gifts, or treasure, or even protecting a few believers confided to his responsibility. Nehemiah was alone; his mission was not to begin until his arrival at Jerusalem. Until that moment he must acknowledge and accept his dependence on the Gentile power. Only on his arrival at Jerusalem, would he be called on to demonstrate his love for the work of God and his perseverance in pursuing it through all the difficulties occasioned by the extreme weakness of the people and the strength of their enemies. From that moment on, we shall see these qualities manifested in him in the course of this account.

Having arrived in the province of Judah, Nehemiah finds himself in contact with leaders hostile to the people of God: Sanballat and Tobijah. The names of the enemies have changed (cf. Ezra 5:6), but the hostility remained. Likewise today, the world

still is the same world which crucified Christ twenty centuries ago, although the names have changed. "It grieved [these enemies] exceedingly that there had come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel" (v. 10).

At Jerusalem, the end of his journey, Nehemiah considers it of primary importance to personally inspect the extent of the evil. He had come to Judah with the captains and the horsemen of the king of Persia, but when the work was in question, he keeps only "the beast that [he] rode upon", that is to say his own resources and in no way does he depend on the resources which the world might offer him. Here his faith manifests itself. Jerusalem was defenseless against the enemy, and her ruin was such that, the city did not even afford a path where Nehemiah's mount could pass (vv. 13, 14). It was indeed the place where faith was called on to demonstrate itself. When God entrusts a work to us, we are to take counsel with Him alone, and like Nehemiah, we depend upon neither the world, nor even the priests, nobles or rulers (v. 16); this is a very important principle for all those whom the Lord sends. Only after he has

taken account of the evil in detail under the eye of God alone, can Nehemiah, who is convinced of his mission, exhort the people to activity in order to remedy the ruin.

In verses 17 and 18, he presents them with three motives to engage them to "come ... and build up the wall of Jerusalem". The first motive is the extreme ruin and misery in which they themselves and the city are found. The second motive is the grace of God which had encouraged him: "the hand of [his] God ... had been good upon [him]". The third motive lies in the king's words and his assistance, which were themselves ordained of God, as it is said in v. 8: "According to the good hand of my God upon me". In these words we see that Nehemiah was of the same spiritual stock as Ezra. He counted on God who answered his confidence fully in grace (see Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; Ezra 8:22, 31). Like the Lord later, Nehemiah could "bear witness of that which [he had] seen" (John 3:11). But instead of meeting, as the Lord did, people who did not receive his testimony, he finds, to encourage him, hearts driven by their need and the realization of their humiliation, and he has the joy of

hearing these words from their mouth: "Let us rise up and build". And we are told "they strengthened their hands for the good [work]." Thus, God had prepared everything: the instrument and the hearts to accept his encouragement and exhortations.

The enemies, Sanballat and Tobijah, and Geshem mock this insignificant remnant and despise them. How could they, who did not know God, guess that fearful creatures without strength could accomplish a work judged impossible by the human spirit? But they do not limit themselves to this and they seek to intimidate those who are now decided to resolutely go to work: "Will ye rebel against the king?" they cry; but nothing moves Nehemiah. He answers: "The God of the heavens, he will prosper us, and we his servants will arise and build; but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial in Jerusalem". This is the same principle which characterizes the people in Ezra 4:3. Indeed, whether it is a matter of building the house, or of raising the walls of the city, this principle does not change. The

people of God can not in any way associate with the world for any aspect of the work of God.

One of the dominant characteristics of the book of Nehemiah is that separation from that which was not Jewish is carefully affirmed and maintained, in spite of the lax principles of a few. Nehemiah's statement: "Ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial in Jerusalem", is confirmed by the subsequent conduct of the people, and even though their leaders lack conscience in this matter, they are reprov'd and put to shame before one and all (see Neh. 9:2; 10:30; 13:1, 3, 28, 30).

Chapter 3

The wall

Before considering this chapter in detail, let us say a few words about what the building of the wall signifies for us, just as in the book of Ezra we have sought to set forth the typical meaning of the reconstruction of the temple.

It is a high calling for the Christian to work at the edification of the Assembly, to bring material to the house of God, and to build on the foundation which is Christ (1 Cor. 3:10-16); but there is yet another responsibility: the rebuilding of the walls of the holy city.

At one and the same time, the walls serve as a separation from people without and a defense against the attacks of the enemy. They surround and enclose the city and serve to mark it off as a unity. Thus the walls form an administrative unity, having its own laws, customs, self-government, which is self-sufficient and separated from foreign elements, and shielded from any mixing. At Jerusalem, these walls surrounded the people of God and at the same time they defended the sanctuary.

The walls are also a means of defense, as we have just said: they repel the assaults of the enemy and offer security to the inhabitants of the city and her citizens. If we apply this description to the present circumstances, we easily see their importance. The city of God, His habitation, the Assembly, is in ruin through our own fault, and has become invisible to the eyes of

man. Should we abandon this state of destruction? In no way. If we have the understanding of a Nehemiah, we will understand that it is urgent to gather together the citizens of the heavenly city, to work toward their visible unity, even though we know perfectly well that this unity no longer exists except in the counsels of God. If Nehemiah had waited until all the inhabitants of Jerusalem dispersed in Persia, Media and the province of Babylon, were re-integrated in their home, before he undertook the construction of the wall, his mission would have been in vain and he would never have set to work. Once the city had been enclosed, God did not leave it deserted, as we shall see, and His Spirit re-awakened the zeal which in some feeble measure filled in the gap left by those still absent from Jerusalem. We will also see that faced with the world's assault, under the leadership of Satan, to prevent helpless believers from standing firm for Christ, we must rebuild the wall which preserves them. This wall is Christ; it is God, it is His Word, the Word of salvation and praise (Zech. 2:5; Jer. 15:20; Isa. 60:18; Isa. 26:1), the only security we can offer the children of God. And finally we will see that the duty of every servant of God is

to separate the family of faith, fellow citizens of the saints, from all evil, in whatever form it may present itself: whether individual or collective, whether moral or doctrinal, whether religious or worldly, carnal and earthly, so that the family of faith may be visible to the eyes of the world and may be acknowledged by the world.

"Let us rise up and build", the people say. Let us not speak of the impossibility of the task. What is impossible to man is never impossible to God. And even though we may be only two or three believers, occupied with "[repairing] over against [our own] house", God will approve us and His good hand will be upon us!

Nevertheless our work does not consist only in raising up the wall: we must also work on the gates. The enemy knew very well what he was doing when he consumed the gates of Jerusalem with fire (Neh. 2:3, 13, 17). The gates of a city are just as important as the wall, and even more so. They may be opened to allow the inhabitants of the city to go in and out freely, but they may also exclude any foreign, sinful, contagious, or crim-

inal element which might seek to take up residence within the city. The gates are closed at night to protect the citizens from leaving the city during the hour of danger, but also to prevent anything contrary to the laws of the city from entering in, and above all to prevent the infiltration of traitors who might open the gates to the enemy, taking advantage of any laxity in surveillance.

Likewise, the city according to God has gates through which the world and its lusts, lying doctrines and heresies, and false brothers may be introduced or repulsed, and which, on the other hand, are open wide to all that is of God, of Christ and of His Word.

Alas! when like Nehemiah, we go around the rubble, we do not find a single vestige of all this in the great house which bears the name of Christ. But let us not become discouraged. If we have the construction of the walls at heart, we will also apply ourselves to rebuilding the gates, and the good hand of our God will be upon us. It is not time to rest: let us encourage one another in this work. Our work will necessarily be feeble and in-

complete, but let us not forget that God recognizes it and that one day He will substitute His own workmanship for ours in the new Jerusalem, "and its gates shall not be shut at all by day, for night shall not be there... And nothing common, nor that makes an abomination and a lie, shall at all enter into it; but those only who [are] written in the book of life of the Lamb" (Rev. 21:25-27). "Blessed [are] they that wash their robes, that they may have right to the tree of life, and that they should go in by the gates into the city. Without [are] the dogs, and the sorcerers, and the fornicators, and the murderers, and the idolaters, and every one that loves and makes a lie" (Rev. 22:14-15).

These preliminary remarks will help us in the detailed examination and application of the chapter presently before us. This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part treats the reconstruction of the wall which surrounded Jerusalem (vv. 1-15); the second part, treats this reconstruction in relation to the "city of David" and the temple.

Under the impetus of a man of faith, or rather under the energetic action of the Holy Spirit who spoke by means of this

man, both great and small rise up and demonstrate their fervor to undertake the work.

Of course, the first person we meet is the spiritual leader of the people, Eliashib, the high priest, and his brothers the priests. They rose up "and they built the sheep-gate. They hallowed it, and set up its doors; and they hallowed it even to the tower of Meah, to the tower of Hananeel" (v. 1). At first glance, the extent and execution of their work seems to leave nothing to be desired. The sheep-gate was the gate closest to the temple, toward the north. The portion of the wall rebuilt consisted of two towers: a work which was particularly important and difficult. The sheep-gate itself was provided with hinges, but it lacked locks and bars. Thus, from the outset, this entrance to Jerusalem was not well guarded against those who might desire to infiltrate the city. It is possible that Eliashib had a personal interest in this omission. He was allied to Tobijah the Ammonite, one of the three great enemies of the people of God, and he had even prepared a chamber in the court of the temple for this enemy! (Neh. 13:5, 7). A grandson of this same Eliashib was the

son-in-law of the second great enemy of the Jews: Sanballat the Horonite. Was Eliashib behaving dishonestly in this matter? No one can say with certainty, but it is a constant principle that association with the world, through the fact that we accommodate it, always marks our work with a character of incompleteness, which the enemy takes advantage of when an opportune moment arrives. This negligence is all the more serious when the worker has a high profile, as is the case here. And nevertheless there was a work undertaken, even a very important work since it directly touched the house of God: it was a work which God took account of, but a work which would have left an open door to a prompt and irremediable ruin, were it not for the vigilance of Nehemiah.

The men of Jericho built next to the priests (v. 2). They had come up from their city (cf. Ezra 2:34, 70; Neh. 7:36) in order to help their brothers at Jerusalem. Their work does not appear significant: they do not build a gate or a tower, but they do contribute to the city's defense against evil from without. Part of this task is entrusted to one man, Zaccur the son of Imri. The

instruments God uses are most varied, but each one is useful and none can be replaced, or choose his work himself. Whether several are associated together, or whether a worker is alone, their sole responsibility is to work at that place which God assigns to each one.

After them, the sons of Senaah (v. 3) (perhaps Senaah is a city, or perhaps it is a district in the region of Jericho) distinguish themselves. They built the fish gate; "they laid its beams, and set up its doors, its locks and its bars." This gate, situated in the northern sector of Jerusalem, was, along with "the gate of the old [wall]", especially exposed to the attacks of the enemy. It was from the north that the Assyrian armies approached the city in order to surround it and besiege it. The sons of Senaah realized its importance; they did not leave off their work until the gate's locks and bars were in position.

In verses 4 and 5, we see first of all Meremoth the son of Urijah the priest, a faithful and respected man, to whom Ezra's companions had entrusted all the free-will offerings sent from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:33-34). His zeal goes beyond the

restoration of just one portion of the wall. He is the first (for afterwards others imitate his example) to repair "another piece" (this second portion was in connection with the city of David and the temple) in front of the house of Eliashib the high priest (v. 21). His zeal leads him to defend the representative of the people before God. The same thing took place in the days of the apostles, and the situation is the same for us today. Faithfulness shown in a service of modest appearance, qualifies the laborer for an activity which relates directly to Christ, our high priest.

Meshullam, whom our chapter mentions after Meremoth, was a man of doubtful character, for he had allied himself to Tobijah, to whose son, named Johanan, he had given his daughter (Neh. 6:18). From all appearances, he was of the priestly race, and perhaps Eliashib had exercised an influence upon him by his own example. In spite of this vexatious alliance, he shows zeal for the house of God, but not the same zeal as Meremoth. Although he next works at the "city of David", his work is directed first of all at protecting his own living quarters (v. 30).

After him, Zadok is among those who do not fear to the work in isolation, at their own risk and peril. Next to these three men the Tekoites repair. They belong to a city of Judah, not far from Bethlehem (Amos 1:1; 2 Sam. 14:2). "But their nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord." On the whole, this lack of zeal, this indifference of the nobles does not — and may it always be so — occasion the consequences which are so frequent in similar cases. On the contrary, since the Tekoites are not dependent upon their leaders, they redouble their zeal all the more. In verse 27 we see them repair "a second piece" of the city of David "over against the great tower which lies out, as far as the wall of Ophel". Ophel, where the dwellings of the Nethinim were located, was connected to one of the gates of the temple. This place is also mentioned in Isaiah 32:14: "[Ophel] and watchtower" (see footnote JND).

Jehoiada the son of Paseah, and Meshullam the son of Besodiah (v. 6), two men with no other reputation in Scripture, repair "the gate of the old [wall]", a gate which was situated in the north west of the enclosure and which, surmising from its

name, was no doubt one of the oldest gates of the city. These two men associate themselves together for this important work, whereas, for a similar work, the cooperation of all the sons of Senaah had been required. The mutual agreement of these two men produces a considerable result: a lesson which is most instructive for us. The expression "next to them", so frequently used in this chapter, is lacking here, when their work is in question. They occupy a distinctive place, being in no way dependent on their brothers, although they contribute to the common work. Such men acquire a good degree. Their work is very contentious; there is nothing missing in the gate they construct: neither beams, nor doors, nor locks, nor bars. And so they serve as a model for others.

Indeed (v. 7), Malatiah, a Gibeonite, and Jadon the Mero-nothite, of Galilee, repair "next to them". Although the origin of these two persons is obscure and despised in man's sight, it is not so in God's sight.

Uzziel the son of Harhaiah, of the goldsmiths, and Hananiah of the perfumers (v. 8), are not associated like their predecessors,

although they work in concert. Their functions which served the luxury of the world were not incompatible with the reconstruction of the city of God, for the Lord chooses His workers in all classes and all positions, and not where men would be tempted to look for them exclusively.*

- * A certain obscurity in the text would lead to the thought that the Chaldeans had not completely destroyed this side of the wall (as well as the "broad wall": the side of which the "gate of Ephraim", (which is not mentioned here), formed part (see 8:16). The "open space" of the gate of Ephraim, formerly enclosed by the wall, appears not to have been included in the reconstruction (see schema).

This same remark applies to Rephaiah the son of Hur, "the ruler of the half part of Jerusalem" (v. 9). The case is the same with Shallum, a respected man who fulfilled the same functions as Rephaiah; only, in speaking of him, the Word adds: "he and his daughters". The work here is carried out by women, but as it is a matter of a work of public nature, they carry it out under the responsibility of their father and in dependence upon him. But, how touching it is to see them, commit themselves to a

work to which their sex was not called and for which their strength seemed insufficient, out of love for the city of God and in view of the restoration of His people.

Jedaiah (v. 10) repairs "over against his house". His first care is to preserve his own family against the invasions of the enemy. The case is the same for Benjamin, Hasshub and Azariah (v. 23), for the priests and Zadok (vv. 28, 29). All these men take it to heart to begin by sheltering those of their own house; and how desirable and profitable is this exercise among the saints at all times. How can one stand as a defender of the people of God, if one doesn't know how to protect his own home from evil? This same zeal brought honor to Gideon, when he was called to judge Israel (Judges 6:25-35).

In verse 11, the example of Jehoiada and Meshullam continues to bear fruit. Two men Malchijah and Hasshub repair the tower of the furnaces which dominated the entire western wall, a work which was as important for signaling danger as for defense; but, the two of them also undertook "a second piece", proof of their untiring zeal.

Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah (v. 13) repaired the valley-gate southwest of the city, with the same care as the sons of Senaah; but in addition to this they repaired a thousand cubits of the wall as far as the dung-gate in the south-east, that is to say, the entire portion of the wall facing directly south. What zeal! and it would seem that Hanun (if it is the same Hanun) did not limit himself to this work, for it is said, in v. 30, that he repaired a second piece.

Malchijah the son of Rechab (v. 14), a recognized leader, repairs the dung-gate in the south-east. He is the first to build a gate by himself alone. And let mention be made of his Rechabite character which qualifies him for the perseverance of faith.

Shallun (v. 15), another respected leader, goes even further. He single-handedly repairs the gate of the fountain in the east, restores it to a complete condition of defense, and he also repairs the "wall of the pool of Shelah [Siloam]", and continues to work along "the king's garden" to the stairs that go down from the city of David. Happy Shallum! And how he deserved the

people's respect and appreciation! The gate offering protection, the fountain offering refreshment and healing, and the shade affording rest: all fall within the circle of his activity. Jerusalem owes the enjoyment of these inestimable blessings to him as the result of his efforts to procure the good of his brothers!

With v. 16, we come to the city of David, properly speaking. We have begun at the north of this city, which was built, along with the temple, on mount Zion, and we have gone around the city to end at the south of the city of David, at the stairs which go down. Thus nothing remains to be repaired but the last and most important part of the holy city, which was nevertheless preserved, in virtue of its position and elevation above the valley of Kidron, from any direct attack by the enemy. The uncertain topography of this region makes some of the details difficult to understand, but since they have only a very secondary interest for us in these pages, they may easily be omitted. Furthermore we notice, from v. 16 on, the words "next to him" are generally replaced by "after him", which seems to indicate that the work can be attacked from several sides simultaneously.

Nehemiah the son of Azbuk (v. 16) is unknown to us like many others, although here he occupies an eminent position. Through his activity he opens the way for works of great importance.

Verses 17 to 21 speak of the work of the Levites. Rehum had returned with Zerubbabel (Neh. 12:3). Later he is among those who signed the covenant (Neh. 10:25), as was, likewise (Neh. 10:12), Hashabiah who repaired "for his district", and who is also a chief Levite especially established to give praise (Neh. 12:24). In every way, these two men are qualified to work "next to" one another. Bavvai (v. 18) has the same dignity and the same district as Hashabiah, but he is not mentioned later. Ezer is found again when the choirs meet, on the occasion of the dedication of the wall (Neh. 12:42). Baruch (v. 20) seems to be the son of this same Zabbai who, in Ezra 10:28, had taken a foreign wife. Such a thing happening in his own family must have produced, in this godly man, a redoubling of vigilance to preserve the priesthood from profane contact. He "earnestly" repaired from the angle to the entry of the house of Eliashib, the high priest, who had urgent need of this solicitude, as we

have seen. Meremoth (v. 21), already mentioned in v. 4, had been faithful from the beginning. He feels, like Baruch, and even more deeply than he, the danger that threatens the high priest. His "second portion" (see footnote: "another piece" is "a second piece" in Hebrew) of work is very precious: in complete accord with Baruch he repairs "from the door of the house of Eliashib as far as the end of the house of Eliashib".

From v. 22 on, we find the priests; the men of the plain do not seem to have had a special purpose in view. Benjamin (v. 23) later took part in the dedication of the wall (Neh. 12:33). Hasshub signed the covenant (Neh. 10:23). Azariah who, like Benjamin and Hasshub sought to safeguard his own house, is very distinguished later: he explains the law to the people (Neh. 8:7), seals the covenant (Neh. 10:2), and takes part in the dedication of the wall (Neh. 12:33). Only the "second piece" of Binnui (v. 24) is mentioned, which seems to indicate that he helped Azariah to protect his house. This Binnui seals the covenant in Nehemiah 10:9. Palal repairs, turning his attention to the structures which were witnesses of royal authority and the

judgment of the guilty (v. 25). In this same verse we find Ped-
aiah the son of Parosh. Several of his brothers had taken for-
eign wives (Ezra 10:25). Later he is present at the reading of
the covenant (Neh. 8:4), and served as one of the storekeepers
over the storehouses of the Levites (Neh. 13:13). Here he
seems to concern himself with the portion of the Nethinim, in
Ophel (v. 26). The priests (v. 28) have their own houses at
heart, like so many others, but they do not seem to have con-
cerned themselves with "the horse-gate". Zadok the son of Im-
mer (v. 29) is a different Zadok than the one mentioned in v. 4.
One or the other of these two men later signs the covenant
(Neh. 10:21) and is established over the storehouses (Neh.
13:13).

Shemaiah the son of Shechaniah is the "keeper of the east
gate", the main gate of the temple precincts. His name is found
later on all the principal occasions. If Shechaniah, his father,
had been the keeper of the gate, Jerusalem would have been in
grave danger from Tobijah (Neh. 6:18). Hananiah and Hanun
repair a second portion (v. 30, cf. v. 8 and 13). Malchijah (v.

31) had taken a foreign wife (Ezra 10:25 or 31) and had purified himself. In v. 32 great number of goldsmiths and dealers put their hand to the work and rejoin the walls of the city of David to the sheep-gate, where the work had begun.

The greater part of these men acquire, as we have seen, "a good degree" (1 Tim. 3:13) through their zeal to build the wall of the city of David. Shouldn't we draw a lesson for ourselves from this? Doesn't the silence and incapacity of so many children of God in the ministry stem in large part from the fact, that at the outset, when God placed some work before them to accomplish for Him — a work requiring effort, perseverance and the sacrifice of their time — they, like the nobles of the Tekoites, have not put their necks to the work of their Lord?

Chapter 4

Obstacles from without

Nehemiah 3 has given us a complete, uninterrupted overview of the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem; Nehemiah 4 tells us what happened during the course of this work. "And it

came to pass that when Sanballat heard that we built the wall, he was angry and very indignant, and mocked the Jews. And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews? shall they be permitted to go on? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, when they are burned? And Tobijah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, Even that which they build, if a fox went up, it would break down their stone wall." (vv. 1-3).

These implacable enemies of the Jews hated them so much the more as they themselves had some knowledge of the true God. Sanballat was at the head of the forces of Samaria, where their idolatrous system of worship was not completely separated from the worship of Jehovah. This is what we will always find. The mixture of the true with the false, in the domain of religion, is much more hostile to the Christian testimony than simple paganism. The world which has drawn its religion from the Bible and the gospels, and has made its credo from certain scriptural truths, is frequently at the head of this opposition. It

cannot endure those who build the wall and the gates of the city of God, for these defenses are against itself. The world's hostility begins by mockery, which frightens the timid more than hatred does. This was one of Sanballat's weapons (Neh. 2:19; 4:1). We all easily feel the influence of mockery if our hearts have not broken former associations with the world. In such a case we will fear ridicule and disdain and we will draw back from public communion with this humbled people, "these weak Jews", who claim to repair the breaches and help their brothers to rebuff the attacks of the enemy.

In vv. 4 and 5, Nehemiah calls the judgment of God down on these men who "have provoked the builders". We cannot make a request like this to God, for our cry in His presence is not and cannot be anything other than the petition of grace: but we know this certainly: God feels the hostility of the world against the family of faith as an insult. "[It is a] righteous thing with God to render tribulation to those that trouble you" (2 Thess. 1:6). And on the other hand we know that the opposition of the enemy cannot prevent the work of God from being accom-

pished. We ourselves need only faith which confides in God and the Spirit which encourages our hearts for the work. Nehemiah adds: "But we built the wall; and all the wall was joined together to the half thereof; for the people had a mind to work" (v. 6). Whether it is a matter of defending Jerusalem or of conquering it, these principles remain the same. Tobijah says: "If a fox went up, it would break down their stone wall"; but Nehemiah says, "we built the wall". The Jebusites said to David: "Thou shalt not come in hither, but the blind and the lame will drive thee back"; but "David took the stronghold of Zion" (2 Sam. 5:6-7).

We have just seen the opposition which the reconstruction of the first half of the walls of Jerusalem encountered (v. 6); but when the breaches began to close, the enemy's wrath increases. "they ... conspired all of them together to come to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it" (v. 8). What would become of this poor people, no longer faced with the opposition of isolated individuals, but now faced with a coalition animated by the same murderous design? In v. 9 we learn that in such a case two

things were necessary: "We prayed to our God, and set a watch against them day and night". Just so, the first thing is confidence in God alone and dependence upon Him, expressed in prayer. "We prayed to our God." He is the great resource. This conviction moves Nehemiah to say, a little later: "Be not afraid of them: remember the Lord who is great and terrible" (v. 14), and again, in v. 20: "our God will fight for us". That is where our strength lies: it is in God and is always granted to us, when we take a position of dependence before Him. The second thing is vigilance: "Be sober therefore, and be watchful unto prayers" (1 Peter 4:7).

Despite these words, discouragement grips Judah! "And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens fails, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build at the wall" (v. 10). How many times when the task is crushing and the enemy is powerful, have we not seen this discouragement produced? Or have we not experienced this discouragement ourselves? The burden is too heavy and the rubbish is too great: we cannot build. Certainly, those who reasoned in this way were not asso-

ciated with Nehemiah's prayer or with setting the watchmen. Instead of looking to God, they looked at themselves and the obstacles.

If Nehemiah had listened to these complaints, what would have become of Judah, for during this time the enemy took every advantage? "They shall not know, neither see," the adversaries say, "till we come into the midst of them and kill them, and put an end to the work" (v. 11).

Another inopportune element adds to the confusion. The Jews who "dwelt by [the adversaries]" came ten times to warn the workers at Jerusalem. No doubt, these Jews had no bad intentions, but their relationship with the adversaries was not the element needed in order to strengthen the heart of the people. In days of trouble, how many times have we heard warnings from that quarter: someone has a grudge against us; the enemy is powerful. Be on your guard, if you persist you will provoke a general attack. Notice that those who give advice had no remedy to propose, and thus they increased the anguish of those who were weak. But the man of God, already convinced of the

path to follow, draws fresh courage from their warnings, and strengthens himself. Thanks to the energy which he finds in communion with his God, the scene changes, and those of the people who had been only laborers up to this point, become soldiers, ready to drive off the enemy.

We Christians ought also to bear these two characteristics in order to labor effectively at the work of God, during the difficult times in which we live: we must have perseverance and energy. Here we find various categories of combatants. At the first moment, when the attack is imminent, all, indistinctly, take up arms. "I even set the people, according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows" (v. 13), says Nehemiah. Thus everything was foreseen: the sword for hand to hand combat, the spear to keep the enemy at a distance, and the bow to strike at a distance. For us, the word of God comprehends all these weapons simultaneously, whose purpose is "fight for [our] brethren, [our] sons and [our] daughters, [our] wives and [our] houses" (v. 14).

Then when this determined attitude had defeated the counsel of the enemy, "[they] returned all of [them] to the wall, every one to his work" (v. 15). "And from that time forth the half of my servants wrought in the work, and the other half of them held the spears, and the shields, and the bows, and the corselets", that is to say, both offensive and defensive weapons. Those that bore burdens and those who loaded these burdens worked with one hand and they held a weapon in the other hand. Lastly, each of the builders had their sword strapped by his side.

All these details carry instruction for us. It is the duty of every one to defend the work of God in certain pressing dangers. At other times, an attitude of defense exclusively may slow down the work. At such times offensive and defensive weapons are entrusted to certain of our brothers. But those who assist in the work, and even those who are fully given to it, must never slacken in their vigilance. If they can not hold their weapon in one hand, let them gird their sword by their side. No child of God should leave entirely to others the care of using the Word, that two-edged sword. Some may be more qualified than others

to apply it at any given moment and in any circumstance; but it is no less true that we must all bear it in every circumstance, and that every member of the family of God should be able to use it on occasion.

Obviously such an attitude can not suit the enemy. When the workers girded their swords to their sides, the enemy could have said to them: Give your swords to others, more qualified than you for combat. Take care of your work: don't attempt to do two things at once. Don't concern yourself about the rest, and everything will be fine. No, the worker replies, everything will not be fine, if I allow your words to lull me to sleep. It is in invaluable privilege to allow the Lord to act, but am I not responsible to fight for Him? To say: the Lord will intervene, when I myself abandon the sword of the Spirit, vigilance, prayer, and perseverance is to run after certain defeat.

But even this is not enough. Nehemiah tells the nobles: "The work is great and extended, and we are scattered upon the wall, one far from another: in what place ye hear the sound of the trumpet, thither shall ye assemble to us; our God will fight for

us" (vv. 19, 20). To be effective, the work must be a combined effort. When the enemy appears, believers must not be found scattered, and if there is no combined resistance at the point of attack, they are sure to succumb. The adversary takes advantage of the scattered condition of the children of God, and their gathering together is what is most contrary to him, because he knows that this multiplies their strength. And so his first concern, when he attacks them, is to sow discord and divisions among them. That is the reason why this call of God: "Assemble to us", still resounds on every side, as in the days of Nehemiah. We have a center of gathering. Let us gather together around our Head. The trumpet has already resounded so as to be heard by one and all. Let us make haste; let us not say: My work is enough for me. No, our Head says, it is not enough, for if the enemy finds you isolated, he will destroy both you and your work. The danger is threatening. Let us gather together instead of scattering. May we have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the assemblies. It is all very well to build in front of one's home, but it is the general interests of the people of God which claim all our energy in view of our broth-

ers. That is why the trumpet calls us together. Soon, when the battle is over, the trumpet will gather us for the last time where there is no more question of building or of self-defense, but where we will enjoy eternal rest in peace!

Chapter 5

Obstacles from within

Nehemiah 4 has shown us the necessity of being armed to accomplish the Lord's work, for, at every instant, we may be called on to fight the enemy.

Nehemiah 5 reveals a very humiliating scene to us. Although the outward testimony of the people was accompanied by praiseworthy activity, their inward testimony left much to be desired and was hindered by scandalous events. What had the brotherly relationships among the members of the people of God come to? Could devotion, pity, and sympathy for the poor be found; and did love manifest itself as it should have? No; "There was a great cry of the people and of their wives against

their brethren the Jews" (v. 1). A great cry! complaints, and re-criminations, which were moreover perfectly justified!

The poor asked for corn so that they might live (v. 2). Where was love? When the rich, following the example of Christ, ought to have laid down their lives for their brothers, did they help them in the ordinary things of life? "Whoso may have the world's substance, and see his brother having need, and shut up his bowels from him, how abides the love of God in him?" (1 John 3:17), or, as it is said again: "Now if a brother or a sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one from amongst you say to them, Go in peace, be warmed and filled; but give not to them the needful things for the body, what [is] the profit? So also faith, if it have not works, is dead by itself" (James 2:15-17).

Others said: "We have had to pledge our fields, and our vineyards, and our houses, that we might procure corn in the dearth" (v. 3). Now, who had taken advantage of them when, in their hunger, they needed bread? It was their brothers: and nevertheless the law of Moses prohibited them from doing this.

The Israelite was allowed to lend to the nations, but he was not permitted to charge his brother interest (Deut. 23:19-20; Ex. 22:25). Thus the love of money caused them to commit this great sin.

Others said: "We have borrowed money for the king's tribute upon our fields and vineyards; yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children; and behold we must bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants, and some of our daughters are brought into bondage [already]; neither is it in the power of our hand [to redeem them], for other men have our fields and our vineyards" (vv. 4, 5). This king's tribute (Middah. Ezra 6:8; Ezra 4:20) was exacted of them. Everyone had to borrow from his brother, pledging his fields and vineyards — and in this way, since they could not repay the debt, not only was the land no longer their own, but they also had to employ their children as slaves, without being able to redeem them, since the fields were in the hands of their brothers. What a miserable predicament! And how forcefully this demonstrates that a testimony which is outwardly in order

is no security for us, and that it may even be a great snare to us in relation to our practical life, for the satisfaction of occupying a position of separation from the world may feed our spiritual pride, and cause us to pass lightly over our moral laxity in our relationships with our brothers. Jeremiah also warned the people against this same danger: "Confide ye not in words of falsehood, saying, Jehovah's temple, Jehovah's temple, Jehovah's temple is this. But if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if ye really do justice between a man and his neighbor, [if] ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow ... then will I cause you to dwell in this place" (Jer. 7:4-7).

Faced with this disorder, Nehemiah was very irritated. He did not go seek counsel from anyone concerning what he must do, any more than he had done on the night when he went around the walls of Jerusalem. "I consulted with myself," he said. He knew within himself what his responsibility was, whether concerning the public testimony, or whether concerning the moral life of the assembly. He did not fear to unmask the chief men in

the presence of a large congregation; human respect did not stop him when it was a matter of the truth. Just so, Paul reproached Peter before everyone at Antioch and resisted him to the face, because he was to be blamed (Gal. 2:11, 14). Here, Nehemiah shows the nobles and rulers that their brothers, who dwelt among the nations, acted quite differently and much better than they did. The dispersed had redeemed their brothers, who had been sold as slaves to the Gentiles, whereas they, in the land, would sell their brothers into bondage! And they would sell themselves to us! What a shame!

Can we not find instruction for ourselves in this? Brothers, who are still bound to the world in many ways, often conduct themselves much better, out of their devotion to their brothers, than others who strongly insist on outward separation. If these two things do not go hand in hand, the Christian testimony has no real value. But let us not forget that the world will be more impressed by a testimony given through brotherly love than by a testimony given through outward separation. This is why Nehemiah said to the chief men, "Ought ye not to walk in the fear

of our God, so as not to be the reproach of the nations our enemies?" (v. 9).

His own position — unreserved devotion for his people and absolute renouncing of his personal interests — allowed Nehemiah to speak like this. He had brought his private conduct and his public conduct into agreement. He could say: "But I did not so, because of the fear of God. Yea, also I applied myself to this work of the wall, and we bought no fields; and all my servants were gathered thither for the work" (vv. 15, 16). He also had the rights of the governor, that is to say: to be fed at the people's expense, but he had completely renounced this right. And the apostle Paul did likewise at Corinth. He who serves at the altar has the right to eat of the altar, and this is the case of all ministering servants, but Paul had accepted nothing from the Corinthians, in order to serve as an example to this dear assembly, which was in danger from those who were spoiling it. As for Nehemiah, he spent his own possessions in order to feed 150 Jews and rulers daily, without counting visiting guests.

Thus, he was qualified to exhort, and moreover to require, that this state of things should cease.

Thanks be to God, Nehemiah had the joy of receiving a positive response. Did his exhortations deeply reach the consciences to those who had sinned? We cannot say. In any case, their words seem a little spiritless for people who are contrite and humbled: "We will restore [them], and will require nothing of them; so will we do as thou hast said" (v. 12). But however that may be, they obeyed, and this simple act of obedience produces joy in Israel: "And all the congregation said, Amen! And they praised Jehovah" (v. 13).

Then Nehemiah turns to God, as he will often do hereafter: "Remember for me, my God, for good, all that I have done for this people!" (v. 19). His simple heart is sure that God approves him; He can stand before God and men with a good conscience. He has abandoned all his rights as Tirshatha for the sake of the service of the Lord and His people, and he has no doubt that God is pleased with himself. But what gives such

authority to his exhortations is the fact that he can say in all truth: "[Walk] thus as you have [me] for a model" (Phil. 3:17).

Chapter 6

Personal attacks

We have noted above that Nehemiah 3 contained an overall description covering the entire period during which the wall was built. Nehemiah 4-6 deal with the difficulties which the people met during this work. Nehemiah 4 informed us of the effort of enemies to constrain the laborers to leave off their work. This effort was thwarted through the energy of Nehemiah, who had directed the men of Judah to take up arms, without abandoning their character as laborers. In Nehemiah 5 we have seen Satan's activity to stir up discontentment and disputes between brothers called to a common work. The example of Nehemiah, who sacrificed his rights and his interests for the welfare of his brothers, powerfully served to tranquilize their spirits and to restore contentment and peace. Nehemiah 6, which we will now consider, presents the attack of enemies in a new form. Nehemiah

was the instrument used of God in these difficult circumstances: the adversaries attempt to do away with him. If their plan should succeed, the entire work would fall along with the servant to whom God had confided it. This effort, the most dangerous of all, was foiled, as we shall see in the course of our chapter. Nehemiah demonstrates rare qualities to resist the enemy's attack, but what is outstanding in him is his complete confidence in the Lord and absolute mistrust of himself. His confidence is conveyed by this expression in verse 9: "Now therefore strengthen my hands!" For he knows that he has no strength and he seeks the strength which is in God.

The attack directed against the person of Nehemiah presents two successive characteristics to which it is well to pay attention. As always, the more dangerous attack comes last. The enemy uses skillful gradation in this business, and it is only at the end that he sends out his best reserve troops against the man he would annihilate. In verses 1 to 9, the attack comes from without; in verses 10 to 14, it is infinitely more dangerous, because it springs up from within the very precincts of Jerusalem.

(vv. 1-9) — The wall had been rebuilt, but the doors had not yet been set up in the gates. In only a few days, the city would be protected against a surprise attack. Before it should be too late, the enemy hastens to take advantage of this imperfection. First of all, the leader of the people must be done away with. Sanballat and his allies invite him to a conference "in the villages in the plain of Ono". Nehemiah answers them with real prudence: "I am doing a great work, and I cannot come down. Why should the work cease, whilst I leave it and come down to you?" (v. 3). He opposes the importance of the work to the proceeding by means of which they had sought to take him by surprise. This is like the exhortation: "Be wholly in them", of 1 Tim. 4:15.

This refusal does not repulse the enemy. Indeed, it often occurs that we may oppose him with a non-receptive plea at the beginning and then, when we have grown only a little weary, we end by yielding to him. After four unfruitful efforts, Sanballat makes a fifth attempt, with a most dangerous ruse. He sends his servant with an open letter in his hand. Everyone might know

what that letter contained, and the enemy did not spare to communicate it, for the accusations and threats which it contained must reach the ears of the people in order to gain auxiliaries for Sanballat.

These accusations and threats pressed five charges. Firstly, It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu says that you and the Jews think to rebel. Secondly, the construction of the wall has no other purpose than this rebellion. Thirdly, there is a rumor spreading (how often souls are frightened by these words: "there is a rumor!") that you have ambitious designs. You want to become their king and you will be accused of desiring to substitute yourself for the sovereign ruler's authority. In the fourth place, you are attempting to carry out this design (as always, according to rumor) through prophets whom you have established to say: There is a king in Judah! In the fifth place, now these things will be reported to the king.

There was enough here to cause even the greatest courage to succumb. There was suspicion cast upon the character and purpose of the Lord's servant and there was fear of seeing his con-

duct calumniated before the king who had put his confidence in him! The conclusion of the letter was an invitation repeated for the fifth time: "Come now therefore, and let us take counsel together".

Nehemiah is not ignorant of the enemy's designs; he knows that the enemy must be resisted so that he will flee; he opposes the truth to the lies destined to frighten him: "And I sent to him, saying, There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thy own heart" (v. 8). Moreover, as was his custom, he accompanies his acts by prayer to God: "Now therefore strengthen my hands!" (v. 9). Oh! how good it is to trust in God! If the enemy comes to us, let us not fear him: at the opportune moment we will be delivered, if we persevere in prayer.

Satan's second effort, even more dangerous than the one just mentioned, arises within Jerusalem itself (vv. 10-14). She-maiah, who was perhaps of priestly origin, here assumes the role of prophet, addressing himself as such to Nehemiah: "He pronounced this prophecy against me" (v. 12). "[He] had shut

himself up", when Nehemiah came to his house, simulating fear, when there was nothing to fear. This man was hired by Tobijah and Sanballat: the love of money had made him become a traitor. He says: "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple; for they are coming to kill thee; even in the night are they coming to kill thee" (v. 10). He pressures Nehemiah to one possibility or the other: either to flee, driven by fear, or else to hide himself in the temple, where only the priests had access, in order to escape his would-be assassins. Now, if he had run away, he would have been accused of having a bad conscience, and if he had hidden himself in the temple, he would have been accused of profaning it by disobeying God's direct commandment. In either way, Nehemiah would have embarked on a path of sin which would have given him a bad reputation and put him to shame (v. 12).

The answer of this man of God is an example both of dignity and humility. He asserts his dignity before these men, his enemies: "Should such a man as I flee?" Had he not engaged the people in the work? Had he not courageously armed them? Had

he not intervened authoritatively when conflicts erupted between his brothers? Did they think that he would deny his own character before these lying accusations? But Nehemiah also speaks a word of humility, which is more important than the first expression: "And who is there, that, being as I am, could go into the temple, and live?" (v. 11). Who is there, being as I am! He uses the same phrase as in his first reply in order to humbly place himself in the presence of God. In the first case, one might accuse him of pride; in the second case, he shows that pride is very far from his heart. How could he go into the temple which God allowed only the priests to enter? A king of Judah had dared to do this, thus setting himself, as king, above the priesthood; for this he had been punished by leprosy (2 Chr. 26:16-21). Did Nehemiah dream of renewing this profane act? Did a man like him have some value before God, or some right to violate His commandments? Through fear, the enemy attempted to provoke him to do so. This proposition came from the ancient Serpent. This is how Satan acted from the beginning, luring Adam into disobedience.

Having refused to enter this evil path, Nehemiah goes no further and leaves the matter in God's hands. It is important to notice this. This man of God could have stirred the people up against Shemaiah, he could have accused him of being a false prophet, he could have publicly proven that he was a traitor, and he could have revealed the ignominies of Sanballat and Tobijah. But he did nothing of the kind! He commits their judgment to God: "My God, remember Tobijah and Sanballat according to these their works, and also the prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets who would have put me in fear!" (v. 14). The names of the adversaries who were enemies of the people come first; the name of Shemaiah does not appear at all here. What a lovely example of a heart which does abandon itself to personal resentments against one who had so seriously wronged him! And what a lovely example of delicacy toward a brother whom he knew to be corrupted and bribed, to whom he might have said: Get behind me, Satan! Noadiah appears only here: a true prophetess who had lent her hand to this intrigue with the other prophets. This woman was inexcusable as were

her companions, for iniquity hidden under the cloak of the prophets must be pointed out!

Thus Nehemiah resisted the attacks and ambushes of the adversary. He had an inflexible object before his eyes and in order to attain it, to faith he added virtue, the moral courage which overcomes difficulties, by rejecting the sin which surrounds us so easily.

In spite of all this opposition, the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth day of the month of Elul, the sixth month of the Jewish year which began with the month of Abib, when the ears of grain ripen: the month of the Passover and the exodus from Egypt. Due to the intervention of divine power, it had taken only 52 days to carry out this immense work. This was the proof to all the surrounding nations that "this work was wrought by our God"; and so it is not surprising that when they learned of these things, "[they] were afraid and were much cast down in their own eyes". But at this point a last danger looms up, instigated by men of consideration among the people. "In those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobijah, and

those of Tobijah came to them. For there were many in Judah sworn to him." Why had they submitted to him and why had they accepted his authority? This is a sad and common occurrence, alas!: this association was to their personal advantage. As we have said above, Tobijah was the son-in-law to Shech-aniah, the son of Arah, one of the most respected men among the people; and Johanan, the son of Tobijah, was himself the son-in-law of Meshullam the son of Berechiah, who was of the priestly race. These nobles of Judah were double-hearted: they attempted to win over Nehemiah, by speaking to him of Tobijah's "good deeds." No doubt they said that he was a likable man who had sought an alliance with the people of God. How many times have we not heard the personal qualities of an adversary vaunted in order to attenuate his hostility and to solicit souls to receive him as an associate! Now these same intriguing men brought the words of Nehemiah back to Tobijah. The purpose of this written correspondence was certainly not to win over the enemy, but to frighten the leader of the people (vv. 16-19).

In this way the adversary sent all his reserve troops out to attack a solitary man. But God was present, and He strengthened the hands of His servant. As He had previously said to Jeremiah, He could now say to this new witness: "I will make thee unto this people a strong brazen wall; and they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee: for I am with thee, to save this and to deliver thee, saith Jehovah; yea, I will deliver thee out of the hand of the wicked, and I will redeem thee out of the hand of the terrible" (Jer. 15:20-21).

Chapter 7

The order of the house, the government of the city, and the genealogical register.

The wall was built; the doors and their bars were set up; the enemy was disappointed in all his attempts to foil this project and finally gave up his ventures. Now, Nehemiah's first concern is the organization of the service of the Lord. The doorkeepers, the guardians of the house, the singers who led praises, and the Levites to whom is confided the ministry of the word (cf. Neh.

8:7) — for the Levites no longer had the charge of bearing the sacred objects of the tabernacle, as had been the case in the wilderness — all these men are established in their functions.

But it is still necessary to entrust surveillance of all this to leaders who have the right to make themselves heard. Nehemiah, through the authority which God confided to him, chooses two men for this purpose. Similarly, we later see Paul choose Timothy and Titus, in virtue of his apostolic authority. The Church no longer possesses this delegated authority, and it were outright presumption to pretend otherwise; but, in spite of ruin, God does not leave His Church without resources, and His Spirit affords the help needed. The activity of the Spirit will never fail the Church.

Nehemiah proceeds to make this choice with wisdom which is given him from above. His brother Hanani had been the first to bring him news of the miserable conditions at Jerusalem (Neh. 1:2). Therefore it was suitable that he who had borne in his heart the shame of the holy city and who had undertaken the

long voyage to Babylon for the purpose of rebuilding the ruins should occupy a place of honor and authority among the people.

The second of these men was Hananiah, the ruler of the citadel; he had served his apprenticeship in the restricted charge which he had occupied in the "city of David" properly speaking. But he had yet other qualifications in addition to this one: "he was a faithful man and feared God above many" (v. 2). The service of God can be confided only to faithful men. If they are not faithful, how can they be qualified as leaders? Thus Paul, like Nehemiah, surrounded himself with servants of Christ, who had been proven and found faithful (1 Cor. 4:17; Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7, 9; 1 Tim. 1:12. See also 1 Peter 5:12; Rev. 2:13). Even today, without the apostolic institution, leaders must have this characteristic. Local churches, taken as a whole, are very rarely called faithful, even in the days of the apostles. In fact, this term is applied to them only twice: in Ephesians 1:1 and in Colossians 1:2. Would to God that the case were otherwise, there where the unity of the body of Christ is realized by the gather-

ing together of the children of God, but how rare this is at any time! Of course it is impossible where there is the pretension to form "churches" through the alliance of Christians with the world. In any case, in the Word we do not find overall faithfulness except when the heavenly position in Christ is known and realized, as in the assembly at Ephesus; or when, as at Colosse, the worth of the person of Christ, the Head of His body, is appreciated, despite the efforts of the enemy to cause the loss of the enjoyment of this.

Moreover, it is said of Hananiah that he "feared God above many". The fear of God is always accompanied by humility: no one can attribute importance to himself when he stands in God's presence, and this is one of the real sources of the authority of leaders. Someone who thinks that he is something is not living in the fear of God, and his ministry will not be profitable to the saints. Sooner or later, God will be obliged to humble him, if He would employ him, so as to render that person useful.

Let us take notice of what the functions of these two men consisted of. They were responsible to scrupulously survey the gates (v. 3). Nothing was to enter the holy city without being carefully controlled. Nehemiah was so fearful of foreign elements being introduced into the city under the cover of night, or even dusk, that he ordered that the sun must be already well risen before opening the gates. In this way, no one could slip into Jerusalem unperceived. Likewise today, except for the fact that we have to do with spiritual enemies, we must watch that doctrines which are subversive to Christianity do not creep into the city of God. These are not necessarily heresies. We often must confront doctrines which are true in a certain measure, but which are displaced in relation to other truths and which, being falsified by this displacement, are all the more dangerous. At all times, leaders worthy of this name must watch that such elements do not take up residence among the children of God during the night or twilight.

The two leaders charged with the government of Jerusalem were responsible to personally watch over the closing of the

gates. They were not to delegate this concern to others, because any negligence in this service would have been fatal, and they needed to be perpetually on guard.

But, on their side, the inhabitants of Jerusalem also had their responsibilities: "There should be appointed watches of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, every one in his watch, and every one over against his house". Today, watchfulness against evil is also the responsibility of everyone, without distinction. Everyone must stand "over against his house". If we allow the enemy to enter our houses, he will ruin the people of God just as effectively as if he should succeed in entering through the gates. We must be vigilant against every form of evil, whether it be evil doctrines or worldliness. Worldliness is even more contagious than evil doctrines, and is so appealing to the tendencies of our natural hearts, that we can not be sufficiently on our guard to repulse it.

Yet another difficulty arises. The city, which was surrounded by walls, was spacious and large, but the people in its midst

were few in number, and "no houses were built"; not that there were no houses, for all the existing houses had not been destroyed, and at the time of the people's return under the leadership of Zerubbabel, many families were able to recover their former dwelling places and had even occupied themselves to decorate and panel them (Hag. 1:4), when the work on the house of God had been interrupted. Thus, we have seen many of them reconstruct the wall in front of their house. Our passage means only that the houses which had been torn down had not been rebuilt; no doubt there existed great spaces which were entirely empty in Jerusalem. Daniel alludes to this work which began in the days of Nehemiah. He distinguishes the first seven weeks (of years) of the sixty-nine weeks elapsed before the Messiah's coming and he adds that during these forty-nine years "the street and the moat shall be built again, even in troublous times" (Dan. 9:25). The street is the place where the activity of the city is concentrated, the meeting place which is the first to be furnished with houses; the moat is a supplementary defense destined to protect the city. It seems to me, that

"the street" in Daniel refers to the open place which was situated in front of the water-gate (Neh. 8:1) in the city of David, in Ophel, and which was not included in the enclosure during the reconstruction of the wall. The word of God does not take us historically to the troublous times spoken of by the prophet Daniel — a period concerning which even the testimony of history is not very explicit.

From verses 5 to 73, we find the repetition of the genealogies contained in Ezra 2. Rationalists have not failed to attack this passage. Eighteen of the figures indicated in Ezra offer variations here: sometimes being a lower figure, but ordinarily being a higher figure. The people, priests, servants of the sanctuary, etc. number 29,818 in Ezra, with a total of 42,360 persons, including those not enrolled. Among this same total of 42,360 persons, Nehemiah indicates 31,089 enrolled persons. Leaving aside the conjecture of errors made by copyists, a conjecture as easy to be made as it is unlikely, we observe firstly, that the enumeration of the leaders of the people contains a name, Nahamani (v. 7), in Nehemiah which is not mentioned in Ezra 2.

Secondly, we see that the genealogical registers drawn up by Zorobabel were brought up to date during a longer or shorter period of time (see Neh. 12:23). Thirdly, a rather remarkable fact is that, if we add to the genealogy of Ezra the 1396 persons who came to dwell at Jerusalem in Nehemiah (Neh. 11), we obtain the number of 25,540 for the people: a number which corresponds almost exactly to the number of 25,406 in Nehemiah 7.

We could add other details, but whatever assumptions we may make, we learn here, as always, to mistrust our own reason, even when material details of the word of God are concerned, and to wait on Him to explain them, if He judges it well to give us necessary enlightening at the appropriate moment. No reader who is submitted to the Word has failed to happily experience this time and again.

Chapter 8 to 10

Religious Condition of the People

Chapter 8

The book of the law and the Feast of Tabernacles.

Nehemiah 8 to 10 concern the religious condition of the people and form a sort of parenthesis, with Nehemiah 11 directly relating back to Nehemiah 7.

Relative order had been established, the wall had been completed, and men from among the people dwelt each in his own city. And now we see them gather together "as one man" (in Ezra 3 they had previously done this when the altar was set up) to the open place that was before the water-gate, in the immediate vicinity of the temple, with no other desire than to hear the word of God. This thought had arisen in their own hearts, and had not been suggested to them by others: "They spoke to Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which Jehovah had commanded Israel" (v. 1). Now, this occurred in the

seventh month, on the first day of the month, corresponding to the feast of the new moon, otherwise called the feast of trumpets (Lev. 23:23-25; Num. 10:3-10; Ps. 81:3), a figure of the renewal of Israel's light, which had disappeared for a time. In Ezra 3, at the time of this same feast, the altar (worship) had been re-established; and now, on this same date, the entire people realize the need to receive instruction from the Scriptures. These two things, worship and interest in the Word, will always characterize an enduring revival according to God, I am sure. The need to be established on the books of Moses fills all these chapters of Nehemiah (see Neh. 8:1, 14, 18; Neh. 9:3; Neh. 10:34; Neh. 13:1). As soon as the Word is in question, we see Ezra reappear, for his gift and his mission were to teach and thus to contribute to the religious development of the people. Although Nehemiah was clothed with the high dignity of his position as Thirshatha, he immediately gives place to Ezra. How good it is to see gifts exercised in mutual communion, without any jealousy, and without some attempting to infringe on the domain of others! Nehemiah exercises government on

behalf of God; Ezra, on his side, teaches and applies the law of Moses.

The whole congregation gathers together to hear the reading of the law: both men and women, and even those with intelligence, that is to say, children capable of understanding what was read. Thus God made provision, in a touching way, so that even young children might profit from His Word.

As Josiah had done previously (2 Kings 23:3), Ezra stood on an elevated platform, with the elders, or chief fathers at his right and at his left. With a solemn gesture he opens the book in the sight of all the people and above their heads, thus giving the law the place of authority which belonged to it. Then he blesses Jehovah, the great God. Certainly, it was in this book that God had revealed Himself and laid claim to obedience. All the people add their amen to Ezra's prayer; they lift up their hands, bowing their heads and worshipping.

The Levites, who were no longer responsible to carry the sacred vessels (1 Chr. 23:26), fill the functions of servants of the

Word by causing the people to understand the law, and we see with what care they do this (v. 8). They read distinctly; this is not without importance. How many times do we not see the Lord's laborers read the Word with a low voice or too quickly, or nonchalantly: and then hasten to speak from themselves, as though it were not more important to hear the word of God than their own word. Here, on the contrary, in the first place it is a matter of bringing the people into direct relation with the law, then of giving its meaning, and lastly of causing the people to understand it (v. 8). Here the Levites play the role of school teachers, and this is all the more striking because children take part in this instruction, a feature which should never be forgotten. A good teacher does not rest until all his students have understood what he wants to explain to them.

The day when Ezra made this gesture and the consequence which followed from it, may rightly be called, as someone has said, "the day of the open Bible". The Bible addressed both the conscience and the heart of the people, and it is touching to see the result. All the people are afflicted and weep when they hear

the words of the law, but Ezra tells them: "this day is holy to Jehovah your God: mourn not nor weep!" And again: "Be not grieved, for the joy of Jehovah is your strength" (vv. 9, 10).

May we never forget this wonderful expression! Humiliation, however precious and necessary it may be, does not give us strength. When we must face difficulties, we find this strength by occupying ourselves with the Lord, revealed in His Word. This meditation is a source of unspeakable joy for our souls, and the joy of the Lord is our strength. Wasn't this what the apostle, although afflicted and besieged with troubles, recommended to the Philippians, as the fruit of his own experience? "Rejoice in [the] Lord always!" (Phil. 4:4).

In another passage (Isa. 30:15), we find a second truth: "In returning and rest shall ye be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be your strength". How often have we not experienced this? Leaving the enemy to agitate himself and redouble his attacks, the Christian rests in the full consciousness that all the activity of man will only weaken the work of God, and with complete assurance that God can act without him.

In Nehemiah, the people obey the word addressed to them; they cease to mourn and weep, and they make great rejoicing: They had understood! May this be our portion as well!

As in Ezra 3 (we have noted the reason for this in the study of this book), Nehemiah omits the mention of the great day of atonement, which took place on the tenth day of the seventh month. But the chief fathers, the Levites and the priests had gathered together to Ezra on the second day of the month "to gain wisdom as to the words of the law" (v. 13). They who had just been involved in teaching the people, gathered together to be taught of God themselves. This should always be the case for the Lord's laborers; it is not enough for them to instruct others. They themselves are weak and know only in part; therefore they need to find new illumination in the Word for their personal use, in order to "gain wisdom". This is what we see happen here; they learn, by seeking instruction in the Scriptures, something which they had not known before: "They found written in the law which Jehovah had commanded through Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the

feast of the seventh month, and that they should publish and proclaim through all their cities, and at Jerusalem, saying, Go forth to the mount, and fetch olive-branches, and wild olive-branches, and myrtle-branches, and palm-branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as it is written." (vv. 14, 15; cf. Lev. 23:33-44).

Once they have learned these things, they communicate them to the people who hasten to do them. Now everyone knows how the feast of tabernacles ought to be celebrated. The roofs, the courts of the houses, the temple courts, the open space of the water-gate and the open space of the gate of Ephraim which was outside the city walls, are covered with tabernacles (v. 16). This feast had not been celebrated in this way since the days of Joshua, when the people had entered Canaan (v. 17). The feast itself had been celebrated in Ezra 3, but not according to the details of the ordinance. Thus it signified only that the land had been once again opened up to the people, following the time when the captivity had closed access to it. In the book of Nehemiah, this feast is celebrated according to the prescriptions of

the law, and this fact is the happy consequence of everyone's ardent zeal to receive instruction from the Word.

It might seem extraordinary that a passage so clear and so explicit had up to that moment escaped the priests and Levites, but this is a phenomenon which occurs at all times in the history of the people of God. Truths which are even more important, as, for example, the coming of the Lord, have been hidden for eighteen centuries, although the New Testament is full of them. This is because the activity of the Spirit of God is necessary in order to discover these things, and the most extraordinary human intelligence is incapable of discerning them.

In Nehemiah and in Ezra we find the feast of tabernacles as an anticipation of the national resurrection to come. This same feast was also sketched out, as it were, with the branches and palms when Jesus entered Jerusalem, in Matthew 21:8; Mark 11:8 and John 12:12, when the crowds acknowledged Him as the son of David and as king of Israel. In Luke 19, we find neither palms nor branches: no doubt the disciples bless the king who is come in the name of the Lord, but they say "Peace

in heaven", and not: "On earth peace" (cf. Luke 2:14), and in Luke we see Jesus weep over Jerusalem (v. 41). The true feast of tabernacles, the final feast, will not be celebrated until a time yet future, according to Zechariah 14:16, but at that time this feast will be preceded by the great day of atonement (Zech. 12:10-14), which we do not find in Ezra or in Nehemiah or in the gospels.

In a sense, we, who are Christians, can celebrate the feast of tabernacles as being the anticipated joy of glory, a "very great gladness" (v. 17), or, as the apostle Peter says: "joy unspeakable and filled with [the] glory" (1 Peter 1:8).

From the first to the last day of the feast (v. 18), the word of the Lord was read to the people; only the word was able to sustain the joy in everyone's heart.

Chapter 9

Humiliation, Separation, and Confession.

The last feast in the series of Jewish feasts was the feast of tabernacles (Lev. 23). Now, the chapter before us has nothing to do with the Levitical ordinances. It was not until the twenty-fourth day — that is to say after the great day of the feast of tabernacles which finished on the twenty-third day — that the children of Israel gathered together in affliction and humiliation (v. 1). Nor did this act have anything to do with the great day of atonement which was to take place on the tenth day of the month, and which Ezra and Nehemiah omitted with reason, as we have seen.

This Nehemiah 9 is a sort of complement to Ezra 10, where the people were separated from alliances contracted by marriage with the nations: alliances which made the family of Israel jointly liable with the enemies of the Lord and of His people. But the purification effected under Ezra was not enough. The people were held responsible to judge a more subtle evil, and if

this evil were not confessed, those who had returned from captivity would necessarily fall back into the profane alliances which they had just abandoned. We wish to speak of the mixing that they had favored by allowing the nations to participate in the life of the people. In order to be truly freed from this mixing with the world, more was needed than separation from this or that scandalous sin, such as the profane alliances of the past; there needed to be real judgment of the condition of heart which had lead up to it, and it is this judgment which we witness in Nehemiah 9.

These events are deeply instructive for us, who are Christians. We must judge, not only this or that fault which we have committed, but also the worldliness which we have harbored amongst ourselves and which is the cause of our faults. We need real separation from the world, for this alone will preserve us from the blatant sins which are the sad consequence of this mixing.

Humiliation and confession were necessary so that the people might effectuate this separation. In our day, how seldom do we

find these things in either individuals or assemblies which have committed faults! When we are called upon to judge an evident evil, we will consent rather easily to humiliate ourselves collectively, as long as this act does not oblige each of us individually to confess our sins and the wrongs we have committed. We will accept any compromise rather than that. Oh! how true it is that the people of God are a stiff-necked people, who refuse to bow the neck and abase themselves in God's presence!

In this chapter, this is not the case: the people truly humble themselves, and they all fast, in sackcloth and with earth on their heads (v. 1). There is mourning, grief, and repentance. But their humiliation is seen not only in these outward signs: it is expressed by their acts: They "separated themselves from all foreigners" (v. 2).

Where did they find the strength to do this? At the same source to which they had previously had recourse. During the feast of tabernacles, the people came to realize that "the joy of Jehovah [was their] strength". With the strength which they had thus acquired, they could humble themselves, separate themselves

from evil without any procrastinating, and confess their state. True humiliation and true confession do not admit delay; action accompanies words. "And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers." (v. 2).

We find yet another powerful agent of blessing in verse 3: "And they stood up in their place, and read in the book of the law of Jehovah their God a fourth part of the day; and a fourth part they confessed, and worshipped Jehovah their God." (v. 3). No confession can be complete without the Word, for it is only through the Word that we learn to know what God is, what is incompatible with His character, and what we ourselves have been. Moreover we see that the confession of the people was in direct proportion to what the Word revealed to them: One fourth of the day was devoted to the reading of the law and one fourth of the day was devoted to confession. They had come to know the source of their strength in the book of the law (Neh. 8:3, 12) and in this same book they now learn to judge their condition so that they might unreservedly confess it.

The Levites play a valuable role in all this. They had taught the people (Neh. 8:8), then, after they had faithfully fulfilled their service, they gained intelligence as to the details of the law (Neh. 8:13), thus entering into a more exact understanding of things already revealed; here we see them stand up on a platform and "[cry] with a loud voice to Jehovah their God" (v. 4). Their faithfulness and their fellowship with God qualify them to become the mouth of the assembly publicly when it is a matter of acknowledging their sin.

This confession, which fills Nehemiah 9:5-38, was quite remarkable. The Levites begin by blessing. It is not possible to be truly in the presence of God, as belonging to Him, without recognizing the patient, merciful character of the God whom we have dishonored. "There is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared" (Ps. 130:4). This was also David's sentiment when he said: "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned" (Ps. 51:4).

The blessings addressed to God consist in this: In verses 5 to 7, the people bless God, the Creator and Preserver of all things,

who is the Same, Jehovah. In verses 7 and 8, they acknowledge Him as the God of the promises who called and chose Abraham. In verses 9 to 11, he celebrates him as God, the Redeemer and Victor over the enemy: the One who saved His people from Egypt.

In verses 12 to 15, they mention their responsibility. God had given them the law, which they were responsible to obey, after He had lead them by His grace to the foot of mount Sinai; but, even after Sinai, He had lavished His resources (v. 15) on them to feed them and give them drink in the wilderness, and had solicited them to take possession of Canaan.

In verses 16 to 21, they recognize the way in which they had answered to all these graces: "But they, our fathers, dealt proudly, and hardened their neck, and hearkened not to thy commandments, and refused to obey, neither were they mindful of thy wonders which thou hadst done among them." Further: they had abandoned God, their guide, in order to choose a leader who would bring them back to Egypt. Lastly, they had crowned they disdain for the Lord with the golden calf, and had

"wrought great provocation" against God. Then they were condemned to forty years in the wilderness; and in spite of that, God had shown Himself to be a God of mercy toward them, in the measure in which His holy law allowed Him to manifest this character (v. 17). Their rebellion had put a stop to all the ways of grace of God toward them, and nevertheless (v. 21) the Lord had watched over them.

(vv. 22-27) — At last they took possession of the promised land through pure grace, as we see in the last chapters of Numbers, and, through the great mercy of God, they "delighted themselves" (v. 25). Nevertheless, hardly had they entered the land, but they rebelled, and in spite of all the previous judgments, they once again "wrought great provocations" against the Lord (v. 26). Then He delivered them into the hand of their adversaries, and notwithstanding that, He still partially delivered them through the judges.

(vv. 28-31) — Rebellions were renewed under the kingdom form of government. The prophets warned them without any

result produced; and nevertheless God "[did] not make a full end of them" (v. 31).

Lastly, (vv. 32-38), they recognize the perfection of all the ways of God toward them and toward all the people, from the greatest to the least: "Thou art just in all that has come upon us; for thou hast acted according to truth, and we have done wickedly". They do not attempt to justify themselves or to escape the consequences of their sins: "Behold, we are servants this day, and the land that thou gavest unto our fathers to eat the fruit thereof and the good thereof, behold, we are bondmen in it. And it yields much increase unto the kings whom thou hast set over us because of our sins: and they have dominion over our bodies, and over our cattle, at their pleasure; and we are in great distress." (vv. 36, 37).

Such is the nature of this confession: simple, thorough, true, without excuse and without evasion. This confession acknowledges the faults of one and all starting from the beginning, it approves the judgment which is the consequence of these

faults, but it also proclaims the inexhaustible grace and mercy of God, who had led them hitherto.

Let us add a remark which is important at all times for the people of God, when they have sinned. Three things are needed: humiliation, separation from evil, and confession; and they are needed in the order indicated to us at the beginning of this chapter. Humiliation without separation and without confession is an act which has no value. Separation without humiliation and without confession is an act of spiritual pride, and denotes nothing other than a sectarian spirit. Unrestricted public confession necessarily includes these two other elements; and that is why it is often the thing to which our proud and desperately wicked hearts have the most difficulty in consenting to. If confession does not take place, then separation lacks reality, and will be followed within a short time by backsliding, whether it is a case of individuals or of assemblies. Therefore may we take this poor, humiliated people, who "cried with a loud voice" (Neh. 4:4) to Jehovah their God, as an example!

In verse 38, we see the people, as a people under the law, renew the covenant: "And because of all this we make a sure covenant, and write it; and our princes, our Levites, [and] our priests are at the sealing." We know that, as a people in the flesh, under the law, they were unable to maintain it. Nevertheless, we may also learn a serious lesson for ourselves from this renewal of the covenant. After confessing our sin, our walk must recommence on a new basis: separation, which is much more real and effective, from the world which has drawn us into evil, and in the midst of which we must henceforth walk as strangers who seek another country.

Chapter 10

Renewal of the Covenant

After confession, we find, as we have just seen, the renewal of the covenant, as had taken place previously under king Josiah (2 Kings 23:3). This covenant was based on the law: that is why it was violated as rapidly as the covenant of Sinai, and as any other covenant made in the same conditions. But these

covenants are an occasion for man to experience in depth what the flesh is, and this is why the law, as an obligation, is necessary.

Naturally we cannot apply this chapter to ourselves in the same way, since our relations with God are those of grace; but here we can see the renewal of relations of fellowship with God, when our unfaithfulness has caused an eclipse to fall on them. Here we find a very important fact: that is, when confession of faults has been real and thorough, we not only recover communion with God, but also communion with one another.

The leaders of the people, the governor, the priests, the Levites, and the chief fathers set their seal to the covenant: 84 persons in all who represent over 40,000. But then we read: "And the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the doorkeepers, the singers, the Nethinim, and all they that had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons and their daughters, every one having knowledge [and] having understanding, joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and into an oath, to walk

in the law of God, which had been given by Moses the servant of God, and to keep and to do all the commandments of Jehovah our Lord, and his ordinances and his statutes" (vv. 28, 29). Here we find the consequence of true humiliation, true separation and true confession. There is no divergence, but, rather, one sentiment; all, young and old, sons and daughters, women and children, priests, singers, Levites, Nethinim "joined with their brethren", accepting what their leaders, these 84 men, had done; there was no opposition from any side; among this numerous people, we do not see one pulling to the right and another pulling to the left; nor do we see a special circle making an independent decision to the exclusion of others. The women and young girls have their place in this universal consent. Isn't this very instructive? God allows divergence and dissension among the children of God when confession of faults is lacking or incomplete, whether it be found in individuals or in assemblies. From the moment that this confession is real and complete, no one having the thought to justify himself or excuse himself, communion with one another is restored.

The covenant includes three points: firstly, the refusal of profane marriages, as in Ezra 10 (v. 30). Secondly, complete sanctification of the Sabbath, which was the sign of the covenant, and the celebration of which had the character of absolute separation from the nations (v. 31). Thirdly, the sabbatical year which, perhaps, had never been strictly kept from the time of the giving of the law. Through these prescriptions we see how all were familiar with the positive teachings of Scripture; but they do not stop there. In verses 32 to 34, they themselves impose commandments, which give proof of real intelligence of the mind of God. They did not have formal texts to act on, but it was "written in the law" that sacrifices were to be offered; and that was enough to inspire each one to impose the expense for this upon himself according to his means. And so it was for the wood to be brought to the house of God. Nowhere did the law command to furnish it, but they were sure of answering to the mind of God by participating in this task, without which sacrifices could not be offered.

Concerning the first-fruits and tithes, they needed only to conform themselves to what was explicitly "written in the law". In all this they acted with one accord: everything appears to be simple and easy when communion exists between brothers, and moreover, when their only motive for action is the service of the house of God (v. 39).

Chapter 11 to 13

Chapter 11

Jerusalem Repopulated

We have already remarked that this chapter is directly related to Nehemiah 7. The altar, the foundations, the temple, and the wall had been rebuilt, but "the city was large and great; but the people in it were few, and no houses were built." (Neh. 7:4) The question which is now raised is this: Had the city been rebuilt only to remain deserted and void of inhabitants? What was the use of defending it if no one gathered together there? Now God had prepared His people for this gathering, firstly

through His Word (Neh. 8), and then by separating His people from the Gentiles (Neh. 9). Now the faithful understand that they must realize this gathering together, and not merely proclaim it as a principle. Jerusalem must be re-populated, even if it be by only one Jew out of ten (v. 1). This assembling in the holy city required much self-forgetfulness and devotion. The pious Israelite must abandon the very heritage which he valued above all else; he must leave those close to him, his vine and his fig tree; he must voluntarily exile himself from the things he had every reason to hold to, since God had given them to him, — and he must do so with no other purpose than to re-populate Jerusalem; but he was encouraged by the very high motive for this self-denial. He had understood that Zion was "the holy city" (v. 1, 18), the city of God's free choice, the city which He loved more than any of the dwellings of Jacob, and this motive was enough to cause the godly Israelite to cherish it more than his own dwelling place.

Nevertheless Jerusalem was diminished, cast down, lacking in constructed houses, and its own state witnessed that it was not

what God desired her to be (see Ps. 27:13; Ps. 87:5-7; Isa. 33:20; 60). But in these times of ruin, even before the wall was reconstructed, Zechariah had prophesied about the city: "Jerusalem shall be inhabited as towns without walls for the multitude of men and cattle therein" (Zech 2:4). Jerusalem, in the midst of her present ruin, could have no attraction for the people of God unless she was considered with the eyes of faith, from the viewpoint of her future glory. In order to go to Jerusalem, leaving all else, a decision was required which faith alone could give and which hope alone could sustain. This could be nothing other than an act of love and of voluntary devotion for the city of the great King; an abnegation which was not the portion of everyone and which God did not require of them. Nevertheless, the people, morally restored, as we have seen, were in full communion with those who took up this responsibility: "The people blessed all the men that willingly offered themselves to dwell in Jerusalem" (v. 2). Such sentiments had God's approval.

Do not these events speak to us of the responsibility and mission of the redeemed in the present day? Like the Jerusalem of Nehemiah, the Church today is in ruins. Nevertheless, the principles upon which she is built, the altar: — the cross of Christ; the foundation: — a resurrected Christ; the temple: — Christ's habitation in the midst of His own; the wall: — the holiness which suits such a dwelling: all this has been brought to light once again through the Word. Now it is a matter for believers of leaving their own dwellings for the purpose of coming to occupy this desolated city, with a heart which is full of affection for her and which shares the sentiments of God's heart for her. Faith alone can produce this devotion.

Can we say today that the people of God bless those who voluntarily offer themselves for this task? Is it not rather true that they oppose them and despise them? But they must be content to have the Lord's approval. They are registered in the same way as those who returned with Zorobabel at the beginning (vv. 3-19); and we have some reason to suppose that their names were added to those of the first list. Remark again that in spite

of the devastation of Jerusalem, everyone who came to inhabit it finds a place there to occupy. Here we have those who "did the work of the house" (v. 12), those who were "over the outward work of the house of God" (v. 16), those who sing thanksgiving in prayer (v. 17), those who keep watch at the gates (v. 19), and the singers (v. 22). In a word, each one of them fulfills his functions as though everything were in order and, on His side, God takes account of this. All this takes place, without doubt, in a time of wretchedness and ruin, but is it a small thing in God's eyes that they should recognize the order He had instituted, and that they should realize this order, despite the ruin, in view of a time of perfection yet future? This poor remnant of Jerusalem has the noble and valuable mission of linking the time of the passed glory of Solomon with the time of the Messiah's coming glory, and this they do during days of humiliation and shame!

Verses 25 to 36 enumerate the cities of Judah and Benjamin inhabited by those who returned from Babylon. There again the order is not perfect; Judah even goes out a little distance from

their limits at Beer-sheba. But these defects are accompanied by a real desire on the part of each one to occupy the place assigned to him by God. Thus, the Nethinim inhabit Ophel, in part of the city of David which was situated without the new wall, but close by the temple which they reached by way of the water-gate.

Chapter 12

The Dedication of the Wall

This chapter begins by recapitulating the names of the priests and Levites who returned to the land with Zorobabel. In verses 10 and 11 we find the enumeration of the high priests, beginning with Jeshua of the book of Ezra. Joiakim, his son, had succeeded him. Eliashib, the son of Joiakim, who had served as a priest during the days of Nehemiah, is the last high priest whom the Old Testament shows exercising his functions. Nehemiah 13 will go on to depict this man in colors that make him an object of disapproval. Joiada succeeds Eliashib, his father, who according to Nehemiah 13:6 and 7, was still priest

after the year 443 B.C.; no details are given us about him. Jonathan or Johanan (vv. 11, 23), the son of Joiada and grandson of Eliashib, is called, in verse 23, as also in Ezra 10:6, Jehohanan the son of Eliashib, according to the custom of the Jews which occurs so frequently. He lived without exercising the office of priesthood, when Ezra came to Jerusalem. Jaddua is the last priest named in the Old Testament. He exercised his functions under the reign of Darius, the Persian (336-330 B.C.), and, if we depend upon history, he was still high priest at the time of Alexander the Great's invasion of Palestine. As is frequently the case in the historical and prophetic books, this passage, inspired like all others, was added later to the book of Nehemiah, in order to complete the information given by the sacred writer.

In verses 27 to 43, we find the dedication of the wall. Similar feasts took place at various periods during Israel's history: Firstly, when David brought back the ark from the house of Obed-Edom (2 Sam. 6:12). Secondly, at the time of the dedication of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 8:12-66). Thirdly, when the

foundations of the temple were laid (Ezra 3:10-13). In the fourth place, at the time of the dedication of the house (Ezra 6:16-18); and finally, in the fifth place, in our passage. These feasts which, with one exception, express only pure joy, were spontaneous and were not part of the ordinances of the law. The joy manifested in them was always related to the house of God. We may draw the consoling conclusion that sensibility to decline must not in any way weaken our joy, for the blessings which the Lord lavishes on His Assembly today have as much value as in the more prosperous times of the Church's history. "Rejoice in [the] Lord always", we are told, and that in days when ruin was increasingly accentuated.

At the time of the dedication of the wall, the Levites whose character, in these books, sometimes bordered on indifference, seem once again to display little eagerness to hasten to the celebration: "They sought the Levites out of all their places" (v. 27). The singers gather together spontaneously for this great feast. No doubt in expectation of their service in the house of

God, they had "built themselves hamlets round about Jerusalem" (v. 29).

Before the feast, it was necessary for the priests and Levites to purify themselves, a feature which was very characteristic of the dispensation of law, in contrast to the dispensation of grace (Heb. 7:27); without this, they could not purify the people, the gates and the wall. The feast itself and the procession lead up to the house of God. The sanctification of Jerusalem and of the people had no other purpose than to glorify Him who had chosen to dwell there.

(Vv. 31-37) — Nehemiah sets the two choirs on the wall at the dung-gate. From that starting point, the first choir, proceeding along the wall eastward, reached the water-gate which enclosed the precincts of the temple to the south, by means of the "stairs of the city of David". In this part of the procession which was the most important, Nehemiah gives the first place to "Ezra the scribe" (v. 36). Ezra walked at the front of the procession; it is very touching to see, in this book, Nehemiah efface himself and make himself nothing in the presence of spiritual authority

superior to his own. By distinguishing Ezra, in effect Nehemiah gives to the word of God all its rightful place, which Ezra represented. As for himself, the Tirshatha, (who certainly had the right to take the first place in the second choir), — he takes the last place: "And the second choir went in the opposite direction upon the wall, and I after them" (v. 38). This choir stopped at the "prison-gate", north of the temple. The two processions met again at last in the courts of the house of God (v. 40), to offer up sacrifices and celebrate His name. "And [they] rejoiced: for God had made them rejoice with great joy; and also the women and children rejoiced; and the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off" (v. 43). All this fell far short, no doubt, of the glory of the days of David and Solomon, but their joy was just as great, for it was the joy of a holy people, consecrated to the Lord, approved by Him, and who had the word of God to direct them.

In verses 44 to 47, we see the effects of the consecration of the people of God, despite the humiliation in which they were found. Many things were lacking: "For of old, in the days of David and Asaph, there were chiefs of the singers, and songs of

praise and thanksgiving to God" (v. 46). Nevertheless, order was not lacking, firstly because the people had recourse to what had been established at the beginning by David and Solomon (v. 45); and then, because the zeal which always accompanies great joy, helped to supply what was missing (vv. 44, 47). Here we see, although it be only for a moment, a consequence of their common joy, the practical realization of first love.

Chapter 13

Individual Energy of Faith

As we have seen, in various circumstances the people had shown their interest and respect for the word of God; the beginning of our chapter once again presents them paying close attention to the reading of the book of Moses. On that day, they realized that they had neglected a requirement in this book, for "there was found written in it that the Ammonite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation of God for ever; because they had not met the children of Israel with bread and

water, and had hired Balaam against them, to curse them; but our God turned the curse into blessing. And it came to pass, when they heard the law, that they separated from Israel all the mixed multitude" (vv. 1-3).

It is not surprising that the people did not think of separation from Ammon and Moab at the beginning. These two nations were brothers of Israel according to the flesh, and in spite of their detestable origin, were descended from "righteous Lot", considered as Abraham's brother, and, in a sense, as closely related to Israel as profane Esau.

The children of the captivity had already separated themselves from all foreigners (Neh. 9:2) and the peoples of the lands (Neh. 10:28), but until that day they had not taken account of this mixed multitude, whose presence was familiar to them. But now they realized that the word of God named them specifically, and they had not paid attention to this! Indeed, Deuteronomy 23:3-6 said: "An Ammonite or Moabite shall not come into the congregation of Jehovah; even their tenth generation shall not come into the congregation of Jehovah for ever;

because they met you not with bread and with water on the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt, and because they hired against thee Balaam the son of Beor, of Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse thee. But Jehovah thy God would not listen to Balaam; and Jehovah thy God turned the curse into blessing unto thee, because Jehovah thy God loved thee. Thou shalt not seek their peace nor their prosperity all thy days for ever".

These events had taken place approximately one thousand years previously, and it is very important to remark that the time elapsed in the meanwhile in absolutely no way diminished the guilt of Ammon and Moab. God's sentence against them remained standing, because God does not change, and because a thousand years are as one day to Him. We often think that, as in human affairs, that a sin committed in the past against Christ and against the people of God, is simply dismissed. Why recall these things we ask? They happened so long ago, that no one remembers them. Therefore, can we still take account of them? Such reasoning always finds approval from what is pleasing in our sinful nature. The idea of wiping over the evil with a damp

sponge seems very recommendable to us at first view; but we forget that the question must be considered from God's point of view. What does He think of the injury made against Himself and His people? The fact is that, from the beginning, He had pronounced a final sentence against "the mixed multitude" and, in this case, Israel was not to consider what seemed suitable to them, but rather what God thought of the dishonor inflicted against His Name. Time had not changed the sin of Moab and Ammon, nor the obligation to separate from them. As for the foreigners and the people of the land, and all who inhabited Canaan at the time of conquest, Deuteronomy had ordered, not only to destroy them entirely, to make no alliance with them, to show them no grace, but beyond that to refrain from joining them through the ties of marriage, lest they lead the people into idolatry (Deut. 7:1-4). Now such was not the case here concerning Ammon and Moab, and as for profane marriages, the people had already condemned them in Ezra 10 and had purified themselves from them. It was rather a case of not considering these two peoples as forming part of the congregation of the Lord.

Therefore as soon as the people heard these words concerning Ammon and Moab, they separated all the mixed multitude from Israel. But before that, Eliashib, the high priest, had himself given an example of unfaithfulness, and his privileged position, as well as his authority, made this departure from the law all the more dangerous. Eliashib was allied to Tobijah, the Ammonite. Tobijah was held in great favor by the nobles of Judah who had sworn an oath to him. As we have seen more than once, he was the son-in-law of Shechaniah the son of Arah, and his son Johanan was himself the son-in-law of Meshullam, the son of Berechiah, a man of the priestly race (Neh. 6:18), perhaps the same who, in Ezra 10:15, had opposed sending away the foreign wives. Moreover we see, in verse 28, that a grandson of Eliashib was the son-in-law of Sanballat, the Horonite, a Moabite. Thus, on both sides the spiritual leader of the people had violated the commandment of Moses, whether by political alliance with Ammon (for we are not told that he was allied to Tobijah by marriage), or whether by matrimonial alliance with Moab.

The alliance with Tobijah had prompted Eliashib to give him not only a place in the congregation of Israel, but also a dwelling place in the house of God! He had prepared the chamber where the tithes were kept for him: "where formerly they laid the oblations, the frankincense, and the vessels, and the tithes of the corn, the new wine and the oil, which was commanded for the Levites and the singers and the doorkeepers, and the heave-offerings of the priests" (v. 5).

Even though at first he may have acted through ignorance, like the people, (something which was already inexcusable for a high priest), Eliashib had not, however, followed the example of the congregation which, on hearing the law, had immediately separated the mixed multitude from Israel. What shame for the spiritual leader of the people! He alone had placed himself above the law of God, above the written Word, by continuing to give an example in this scandal, and the people had tolerated it!

Nehemiah's return was required in order to put an end to this sacrilegious abuse. While these things were going on, he was

with the king at Shushan, because his leave of absence had expired (v. 6; cf. Neh. 2:6). But when he returned, a situation like this could not escape him. Although everyone else tolerated it, Nehemiah could not. This man of God admitted no excuse for evil; he did not consider the position of the one who had committed it and did not spare him; he immediately purified the house of God, the chambers defiled by the presence of this Ammonite, and restored them to their original purpose, after having thrown out all of Tobijah's household stuff.

But what consequences the sin of Eliashib, a single prominent man, had brought to all that was connected with the sanctuary! The tithes had been neglected since there was no more place to store them, and since the Levites and the singers therefore lacked the things necessary for their subsistence, each one had fled to his own field. Because the Levites were lacking, the service of the house of God had suffered from this, and this single sin had brought on incalculable consequences for what was the very center of the religious life of the people.

In regard to this disorder, Nehemiah did not hesitate any more than he had for Tobijah's chamber. The house of God had been abandoned; there must be no delay. One initial energetic act of [faithfulness?] should call for another. Nehemiah gathers together the rulers and makes them stay at their posts (v. 11). He confides the division of the tithes to men among the priests, the scribes and the Levites, that is to say, among those whose functions put them into immediate relationship with the house of God, and alongside them men "esteemed faithful".

Yet other things had been the consequence of unfaithfulness committed in high places, at least we may think that the fact related, from verse 15 to verse 18, must necessarily follow the negligence of worship. The Sabbath was no longer observed. If on the one hand the people had quickly abandoned, as regards the Levites, what in happier days, when moved by first love, they had done toward them (Neh. 12:47), on the other hand they had forgotten, in relation to the Sabbath, something even more serious: which they had solemnly engaged themselves to keep at the time of renewing the alliance! (Neh. 10:31).

The Sabbath was the essential ordinance of the law. It was the only commandment among the ten words which was not based on a moral question. It was simply the expression of the will of God and His Word, who had instituted this commandment. It served as a "sign between [God] and the children of Israel" throughout [their] generations. Observing it was a question of simple obedience, without be able to call on reasons based on conscience, and its capital importance consisted in precisely this feature.

Now what did Nehemiah see? "In those days I saw in Judah some treading wine-presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading them on asses; as also wine, grapes and figs, and all manner of burdens; and they brought them into Jerusalem on the sabbath day; and I protested in the day on which they sold victuals. Men of Tyre also dwelt therein, who brought fish and all manner of ware, and sold it on the sabbath to the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem" (vv. 15, 16).

The care of personal affairs and the concern for profit had turned the Jews aside from this great commandment, and, con-

sequently, they tolerated foreigners, men of Tyre, to do the same. Their well-being and the amenities of life accommodated these transgressions. They reached the point where they themselves profaned the sabbath, and in view of their own profit, they allowed the men of Tyre to profane it.

Nehemiah confronts the leaders, and he acts toward them as he had first done toward the chief man of the priesthood. "And I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said to them, What evil thing is this which ye do, profaning the sabbath day? Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us and upon this city? And ye will bring more wrath against Israel by profaning the sabbath" (vv. 17, 18). But he does not stop at this reproof; he closes the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath (v. 19). What was the use of the gates which he had re-established at the expense of so much perseverance, if they remained open to evil and transgression? He deals with the evil in a straightforward way, and this is how the authority of God proceeds when we allow it to direct us. It does not com-

promise when it is a question of maintaining respect for the Word.

In verses 23 to 28, we encounter a new result of Eliashib's unfaithfulness. Whereas the majority of the people had purified themselves, a certain number among them had remained obstinate. The eyes of the zealous servant, which nothing escaped, discovered this quickly. Although the Ammonite and Moabite were no longer tolerated in the congregation, individuals, who were encouraged by the example of Eliashib's family (v. 28), had not broken matrimonial alliances with Ammon and Moab. They had children, already grown, who did not know the language of the Jews and who spoke in the language of Asdod — for, to these two nations a third was added: the Philistines, to whose territory Asdod belonged. Thus, these three constant enemies of the people of God (without mentioning Edom) were received into their families and begot sons in their own image; for alliance with the world never profits the people of God, and we do not see here that the children of the Asdodians learned the language of the Jews.

Nehemiah shows no pity toward these men who, on the day following a solemn alliance, could behave in such a way: "I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them and plucked off their hair, and adjured them by God [saying], Ye shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves!" (v. 25). He shows them to what such alliances had led Solomon, the greatest of the kings of Israel. It was precisely, first of all, among the Moabites and Ammonites that he had sought wives and it was toward their gods that he had turned aside (1 Kings 11:1-8).

What more was there to do? Chase the son of Joiada, Eliashib's grandson, out of his presence! "Remember them", says Nehemiah, "my God, for they are polluters of the priesthood, and of the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites" (v. 29). And so the people were "purified ... from all foreigners" (v. 30) at that time.

Nehemiah knew that this faithfulness should be rewarded. He did not do these things in order to obtain the reward, but he

knew that the Lord was faithful and would remember His servant. No doubt, he had no right to anything from the Lord, but he knew that the Lord takes account of the faithfulness of His own and that He loves to tell them, when the moment of retribution is come: "Well, good and faithful bondman, thou wast faithful over a few things, I will set thee over many things". (Acts 25:21) In the same spirit Paul could say: "I have combated the good combat, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth the crown of righteousness is laid up for me, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will render to me in that day" (2 Tim. 4:7-8). May we also say, at the end of our career, like faithful Nehemiah: "Remember me!" (vv. 14, 22, 31).

Did the condition of purification related in this chapter last for long? How humiliating it is to be obliged to recognize that it lasted for only a brief time. Malachi who prophesied, no doubt, after (but not long after) these events recorded by Nehemiah, shows us that in addition to the indifference of the priesthood toward God was added, on a large scale, disdain for God's institution of marriage, a disdain which provoked Nehemiah's in-

dignation. All this presents a very serious lesson to us: The greatest danger which can threaten the Assembly of God, in this world, is precisely tolerance concerning the "mixed multitude" and, in fact, it is the principal cause of the Church's ruin. It is relatively easy to separate "all foreigners", from the world properly speaking, and the danger of following them is not so great as the danger of walking with those who have the same profession and, in appearance, the same origin, without having faith. Such persons claim the right to labor together at God's work, and, under cover of Christian profession, they seduce true believers through alliances which seem to be very advantageous.

May the Lord preserve us from this spirit and deliver us from these associations! They always result in spiritual weakening which goes beyond the limit of the family where they are contracted, and necessarily extend to the life of the Assembly, and reach the glory of God and the purity of His house in this world.

The book of Nehemiah teaches us what the believer ought to be in these difficult days when decline is irremediable and when it is a matter of glorifying God in a setting which ruin has made quite different from what it was at the beginning, but where nevertheless, and this is a characteristic feature, the authority of the word of God is recognized and proclaimed. Indeed, from the time of the arrival of Ezra, the scribe, at Jerusalem, we see the word of God play a major role on every occasion: it is listened to and appreciated.

In the book of Nehemiah, the people have recourse to the word of God and they submit themselves to it. The expression: "As it is written in the law" plays a major role in these books. The desire to "gain wisdom as to the words of the law" moves the leaders to listen to it. The people themselves request the reading of the law and they pay attention to it; Ezra and the Levites read it in the presence of all. Ezra, the representative of the written Word, leads, as we have seen, the first choir at the dedication of the wall. Lastly, in the chapter which we have been

considering, the people learn their responsibility through the book of the law.

Thus the "opened Scriptures" are one of the great characteristics of the book of Nehemiah and they help all the activity of this man of God, but his activity itself does not consist precisely in this, for this domain rather proceeds from Ezra's office. Ezra could be called the man of humiliation, humiliation which in no way excludes the firm purpose to lead the people to separate themselves from evil. Ezra is, moreover, the man by whom the word of God is once again set in honor, and this role of the Scriptures continues, whether by his means, or whether by means of the people's spontaneous acceptance, through the entire book of Nehemiah.

As for the person of Nehemiah, from the beginning we see him expend incessant activity in order to restore and defend this poor people. The immense work of rebuilding the walls depends entirely on his initiative, But his zeal is just as ardent against evil as it is in favor of what is good. He contends with the nobles and chief men who pressure their brothers and he

himself sets an example of abnegation, for zeal without self denial is of little value. He is at the head of the list of those who sign the alliance, and faithfully submits himself to it. At the dedication, he takes the last place, giving the first place to Ezra. Lastly, he demonstrates uncompromising energy, when he sees evil slip into the congregation, under the auspices of the high priest himself. He casts out everything that belongs to Tobijah, without hesitation or any regard for Eliashib. He contends with the chief men concerning their treatment of the Levites, just as he had already contended with them previously concerning the way in which they treated their brothers. He protests touching the sabbath and contends with the nobles of Judah; he admonishes the merchants who come on that day to bring their wares to Jerusalem. He contends, he curses, and even beats those who, in spite of their oath, do not divorce their foreign wives. We can say of Nehemiah what was said of one greater than he, whose sandal he is not worthy to unloose: "The zeal of thy house devours me." (John 2:17) He also, in His character as the divine master, knows how to make a scourge of

cords in order to chase out of the temple the sellers and those who had profaned the sabbath.

Such zeal is necessary in the times in which we live. How often we hear: bear with evil, don't judge it, and wait for God to judge it. These are words which are as dangerous as they are plausible! What would have become of the congregation if Nehemiah had adhered to such principles? Let us take him as an example, but, above all, let us follow in the steps of Christ. The energy of the Spirit is just as necessary as love and grace. One ought not to give place to the other; both are equally useful for the prosperity of the people of God. These qualities are rather disassociated in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, because men of God generally demonstrate one or the other of these characteristics in a pre-eminent way; such, for example, is the energy of a Peter and the gentleness of a John; such also, in modern times, as lesser examples, is the courage of a Luther and the moderation of a Melancthon.

In Christ alone, all the qualities of the servant of God were indissolubly united and perfectly balanced. His soul was, as one

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has said, a keyboard whose every key resounded at a given moment in such a way as to form a perfect harmony in response to the fingers of the sovereign Master who drew forth chords which were both marvelous and divine!