

SUNDAY
SCHOOL

The Quiet Hour

YOUNG
PEOPLENEHEMIAH REBUILDS THE
WALLS OF JERUSALEM.

Nehemiah's rebuilding of the walls like other enterprises of faith, was "not, at first, with ill-natured sarcasm and clumsy jeers. But when it looked like being a success, the contempt darkened into active opposition. Tobiah the Ammonite no doubt thought himself very witty when he talked about a jackal's tread being enough to break down the hastily-built masonry, but when the gaps in the fortifications were filled and the circle was completed to half the height of the old walls something more than witty sayings was called for. The enemies of God's cause make jests on his servants' feeble efforts, for they are too blind to the potency lodged in these, and in their blindness cannot but despise the "day of small things." But they change their tune before very long, and see it to be necessary to muster their forces for a serious fight. "Consecrated cobbles," Sidney Smith called Carey and his helpers, but nobody now thinks that Christian missions can be killed by ridicule or nicknames.

So our lesson begins by telling of the conspiracy to stop the building, and how Nehemiah met this. Common hatred is a strong cement of a sort of alliance. And Sanballat the Samaritan and Tobiah the Ammonite and Arabians and Philistines, who were all ready to cut each other's throats, were for the moment drawn together. They were a very heterogeneous rabble, but they all hated and feared the Jews more than they hated, or feared each other. Birds of all sorts flock together to attack a "speckled bird" that is, unfortunate enough to get among them, and, as a prophet says, Israel was such a speckled bird among the nations. Dislike of Christ's consistent followers makes the world sink its differences and unite its forces against them.

Nehemiah's measures of defence are introduced by one of the significant "buts" of the Old Testament. The ring of enemies was numerous and formidable, and the little group which they surrounded, bent on mischief, was small and weak. The situation was like that of some small domestic animal encompassed by beasts of prey; it was so small and they were so many, that there would not be a morsel apiece for each. But there was an unseen Helper whose presence redressed the disproportion. As another Jewish hero once said to hearten his servant, "They that are with us are more than they that are with them." So Nehemiah was intensely "practical," and immensely right, in the order in which he went to work for defence. He set the people to pray first and to watch afterwards. "We prayed unto our God"—there is the most blessed fruit of being put to straits, a renewed tightened clutch of God's hand, a firmer realization of our personal possession of him. If our enemies drive us to him, they have been our best friends. "Well blows the storm" that blows us to His breast. And to pray first stimulates us to "set a watch against" perils. The man who prays and does nothing is presumptuous, and his "faith" is spurious; the man who takes all human precautions and does not pray is more presumptuous still and his precautions will be in vain.

We next hear of the many voices that spoke discouragingly, and of what Nehemiah did to silence them. Three sets of speakers are mentioned, each having a descending or threatening word to say. There are always such who criticise and clog the wheels of every great enterprise.

First come the faint-hearted people, who see the workers' weakness and are frightened by the tremendous task, and come at once to the conclusion that it cannot be done. To measure sanely our strength and to see plainly the difficulties before we put our hands to any task for God or man, is not only permissible but necessary, and he is a fool who neglects to do both. But it is one thing to say "difficult," and quite another to say "impossible." "We are not able to build the wall" is no doubt true, but is it true that God is not able to build it through our means?

Another voice came from whispering enemies, which probably, Nehemiah heard of through spies, who kept him aware of what was going on outside. Those enemies were as sure of success as the faint-hearted Jews were of failure. And both the Jews and they were making the same mistake, that of leaving God quite out of the reckoning. If he was with the builders, they might say "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to account anything as from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God." If God were with the assailed, the assailants reckoned without their host when they expected to "slay them, and cause the work to cease." God's help upsets enemies' calculations and rebukes faithless fears.

A third voice was that of Jews scattered in the outlying country, who were afraid of their own safety, and demanded that instead of building the walls and leaving them undefended, their safety should be first secured and the walls left alone till that was done. How many of their children are in our churches today! "What folly it is to send missionaries to the heathen, while thousands at home are non-Christian!" Charity begins at home," etc., etc. We have all heard that voice.

Nehemiah heard all the babble of these various carpers, and, like a wise man, said no word and slackened no work. All his answer was to make more thorough preparations for defence. He mustered the people and posted them behind the wall all around the circuit, where they were sheltered from assault and at hand for defence if an attack was suddenly made. And he spurred their courage by a grand laconic word, which contains the essence of all inducements to brave conflict. He bids them not to be afraid of the enemies, and he points them to the one thought that justifies their not being so. If we remember God, we shall not fear what man or devil, or "any other creature," can do to us. If we forget Him, we shall not be able to cast out fear, and we shall do well to be afraid.

To show that we are ready for assaults often prevents their being delivered. The enemy saw that their plans were known, and being foiled in their expectation of catching Nehemiah unawares (v. 11), they dropped their notion of a surprise attack. But notice that Nehemiah does not say that (v. 15), but goes on to tell that "we returned all of us to the work." That is a grand example of noble persistence in God's service, which it would change many a Christian life to imitate. As soon as the pressure of some opposition, danger or trial is slackened, back to service—is that our practice? Do we use times of ease when we are not hampered by trials, in order to throw ourselves with fresh zeal into Christian work?

Verses 16-20 tell us how the two things preparedness for resistance and diligence in building, went side by side. Both forms of service are incumbent on Christians still, and will be till the end. And in the realities of the Christian life, we may even say that the work of the individual Christian in regard to his own growth partakes of both characters.

Christian progress is, in one respect, a being built up, and in another it is a conflict. We are God's building and we are also God's soldiers. In regard to the work of the church in the world, the same union of constructive and militant activities should have place. It is true that times when the church has had to fight for its existence have seldom been epochs of growth, but they have been epochs of intensive advance, and if in them the church has not been built wider, it has been built higher. But the lesson taught by Nehemiah's union of the two kinds of activity is that we must never let the controversial side of the church's activity absorb its energies, but blend that side with the other. The church militant is to be the building church. This is to be our uniform, and this our work: "Every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded."

DIVINE HELP.

O Lord divine, ineffable!
Heip the weak heart that strays from Thee!
And battling with the hosts of hell,
Doubts or despairs of victory;
For Thou hast died upon the tree,
Thine anguish poured in bloody sweat,
And can my yearning heart forget
The lost fruits of that agony?
O Lord, in glory, think on me!
I know that from the depths of sin
The uttermost abyss of woe,
Thine arm my trembling soul shall win,
Thy piercing eyes Thy child shall know.
Though mortal faith grow cold and die,
Thy love is called eternally,
Thy truth is morning's orient glow,
And wide as space shall ever grow.
—Rose Terry Cooke.

PRAYER.

Assist us, O Lord, to feel the responsibility, the solemnity of life. Forbid that this year should pass without our questioning it as to the report it has to make concerning us. Surely mercies have come with it for which we should be grateful; and follies and sins have come with it for which we should be humbled and penitent. If the days and months now past have brought us suffering, may it be seen that we have profited by it. But Thou hast been long-suffering, O Lord, and very gracious; and we pray that our souls, in the memory of Thy goodness, may become more than ever Thine in the exercise of every dutiful affection; and may our remaining days be marked by the signs of a growing spiritual life. Great God, our Father through the Lord Jesus Christ, hear us in this our earnest supplication, for the Saviour's sake.

Great occasions do not make heroes or cowards; they simply unveil them to the eyes of men. Silently and imperceptibly, as we wake or sleep, we grow strong or we grow weak, and at last some crisis shows us what we have become.—Canon Westcott.

Christianity is faith in God and also in man. And yet, God, to thousands, is only a prisoner shut up within books or service. He dwells there, it is true, but his favorite abode is a human heart.

Religion is a growth. We are all born as children into the spiritual, as into the natural world. But so many never get beyond the childhood age of faith. They cry for their milk bottles, and sometimes mistake their crying for service.

*S.S. Lesson 10, Dec. 3, Nehemiah rebuilds the walls of Jerusalem. Neh. 4: 7-20. (Study the chapter.) Memory verses: 10, 20. Golden Text: Watch and pray.—Matt. 26:41.