

NEHEMIAH'S INHERITANCE, PART I (Neh. 9:1-6)

What a change there has been in Jerusalem! At the beginning of summer 445 BC, Nehemiah began the building project amidst all the doubts and fears of the enormity of the task and the opposition of the enemy. After fifty-two days the wall was completely rebuilt and the gates hung in place (Neh. 6:15).

Then, on the first day of the seventh month (8:2), when perhaps some might have thought it was time to start building their own homes, all the people met in front of the water gate, on the eastern side of the city. From a specially constructed platform, Ezra began to read the Law of Moses.

As the people listened intently, there was a great outpouring of grief when they realised how they and previous generations had been unfaithful to God (v.9). Ezra then told them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry [*sad*]; for the joy of the LORD is your strength (v.10). ... On the following day, the men returned to receive more in-depth teaching from the Law. Specifically, their attention was focussed on *The Feast of Booths* which had been allowed to lapse. They reinstated it and then listened to more instruction from the law of God (8:18).

This continued for over three weeks, at the end of which they were so stricken with guilt for their outright defiance of God's Law that on the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month they came with fasting, and with sackclothes, and earth upon them (9:1). God had been showing them how their undealt-with sin had brought their nation to such a low spiritual point. ... Their sin had been the reason for their exile to Babylon, but it had not yet been dealt with during the seventy years of captivity, nor during the 161 years since they returned to Jerusalem. ... They had

not repented before God but this was *now* the time when He would require it of them and they, - called by His name, - eventually arrived at the place were, - in listening to His Word, - they were humbling themselves, and praying, and seeking His face, and were ready to turn from their wicked ways. ... At this point in their history, God was listening from Heaven, ready to forgive their sin, and willing to heal their land. ... He had brought them out of Babylon under Zerubbabel initially, and then Ezra, and latterly Nehemiah for such a time as this. They had resettled in Jerusalem because God had made it happen ... and that is what these people were realising.

They did not deserve it, but such was the covenant God had made with their nation, He would restore them to their land and to their city. And for over three weeks, from dawn to noon, at least five hours every day, from the first day of the seventh month to the twenty-third day, they had been listening to the Word of God being read and explained, - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. ... They were *engrossed* as Ezra 8:3 read therein ... before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law ... and again, 8 So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly ... and again, 13 And on the second day were gathered together the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests, and the Levites, unto Ezra the scribe, even to understand the words of the law, ... and again, 18 ... from the first day unto the last day, he read in the book of the law of God ... and again, 9:3 And they stood up in their place, and read in the book of the law of the LORD their God.

Satan hates to hear the reading of God's Word for it reminds him he is a defeated foe. He can 'rant and rave' and 'stamp and strut', but he cannot stray one 'milli-centimetre' beyond what God says. He *cannot* do what he wants, and anything he *does* has to have the endorsement of God (cf.

Job). ... And God's Word reminds him Jesus defeated him at the cross, - Christ won, and he lost! ... And that is why he hates God's Word being read.

He cannot cope with it. It is too much for him. He knows how the Word of God is able to 'cut him in pieces' for it is like a sword which pierces into the most inner recesses (Heb. 4:12). It is also like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces (Jer. 23:29) ... and like a fire burning away all dross and impurity. It is like the seed dropped into the ground in the planting season. And it is like a mirror in which we can see ourselves. It is as a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path (Ps. 119:105) ... The Word of God is all these and more ... and when it was being read by Ezra and his assistants in Jerusalem, it was attended by the power of the Holy Spirit Who opened the minds and hearts of all those people to believe and receive it. ... Gone were all thoughts of other jobs still needing done for the people were so taken with God in their midst!

How we would love such an experience, *or would we?* ... Look closely ... They went from feasting (8:12) to fasting because of what they heard being read. One day they were rejoicing, the next they were weeping for it was dawning on them how far they were from God ... They had been repeating the sins of their fathers in the wilderness, and the sins of previous generations who provoked God to wrath before they were carried off to Babylon. But, under the sound of God's Word, they were convicted of their sin, and they stood at the water gate in sorrowful repentance. As the psalmist cried out, so did they, **Ps. 51:2** Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. **3** For I acknowledge my transgressions.

They had never really considered they were sinners ... Sinners were the people from other nations, but not the children of Israel! ... Not until

they saw their reflection in the mirror of God's Word did they see their filthy condition. Previously, they had altered their 'religion' to make themselves feel good for, after all, they were the sons of Abraham, no matter how they behaved! ... That is how some Christians operate too for it is as though God is there to serve them, rather than them being there to serve Him! They try to 'get off' with doing as little as they can for Him, but expect Him to do everything for them ... That was how these people were *until* God's Word penetrated their hearts.

Not only the unsaved need to repent, but the saved often need to repent too! Look through the Bible and see how that applied to many of God's servants, for example, David, my sin is ever before me (Ps. 51:3). Sin is the habitual addiction of every person in this world, and yet, the Christian is saved by God's grace, at the cost of the Saviour's blood ... saved *from* sin and saved *not to* sin. It is God's intention for His people to be holy as He is! ... That is our desire.

And that is how these people of Jerusalem came to be fasting, and with sackclothes, and earth upon them. They confessed their sins (v.2,3) and they worshipped [*bowed down before*] the LORD their God (v.3). ... What would Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem be thinking now?! ... *Who cares!* ... It is what God sees, that matters! The world has no idea about our relationship with Him. They do not understand why we love Him! It is nonsense to them, but to us He is precious ... and that is how He was again to these people standing at the water gate. To them, His name was Wonderful, the mighty God of Israel.

They had stopped eating. They had stopped making merry. They had left their good clothes at home and they had replaced them with coarse uncomfortable rags as they knelt on the ground, picked up handfuls of dirt, and poured it over their heads. They were *sorrowing*, - repenting, -

of their sins because they had come face-to-face with God through listening to the reading of His Word.

And the next thing they did was to separate themselves from all the people who were not Jews, ² And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers. They detached themselves from the world and its influences. The outsiders would not have understood what was happening. You would have wasted your time trying to explain to them how God's children are distinct and 'peculiar' because they are chosen by God, and precious (I Peter 2:4), and belong to a 'holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. ... It's why, though, the Jews had to separate themselves from all strangers [*foreigners*], and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers (Neh. 9:2). ... It is not the way of the world, and the world does not understand it, but this was God graciously dealing with His people, as He had promised He would in II Chron. 7:14. ... This was them, - at last, - humbling themselves, and praying, and earnestly seeking His face, and committing themselves to turning from their wicked ways ... and He would respond by hearing from Heaven, forgiving their sin, and healing their land.

It would be hard turning from their wicked ways, but that is what they committed to do. As a result, God would honour and bless them ... **Neh. 9:3** They stood up in their place, and read in the book of the law of the LORD their God one fourth part of the day; and another fourth part they confessed, and worshipped the LORD their God. ... Three hours listening to God's Word and another three hours of worship! Six hours with each other and with God! ... They were serious about their relationship with Him, and He was serious about His relationship with them! ... ⁴ Then stood up upon the stairs, of the Levites, [*eight men who*] ... cried [*continuously wailed in their need*] with a loud voice unto the LORD their God. ⁵ Then the Levites ... [*another eight men*]

said, Stand up and bless the LORD your God for ever and ever: and blessed be thy glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise. They lifted high His name as only true believers can. In awe, they revered Him, **6** Thou, even thou, art LORD alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee. ... God is the Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer, the Shepherd and Keeper of His people ... God alone is God, and there is none other ... Thou, even thou, art LORD alone!

What a journey they were on! Their ancestors had travelled through the wilderness for forty years, and had been through seventy years in Babylon ... but at last, they had made the most important journey, the journey back to God ... They were arriving at the place He had for them to be! ... What took them so long? ... Disobedience and pride 'took them the long road round'. If only they had humbled themselves earlier, and prayed, and sought God's face, and turned from their evil ways earlier ... they would have arrived sooner and saved themselves so much trouble and heartache.

God does not enjoy seeing His children endure adversity, and yet through it and in it He loves us and is preparing us for His presence in glory. That is how Paul explained it, **Rom. 8:28** we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. **29** For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. **30** Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. ... It is hard at the time to see what He is doing but His Word teaches us clearly He is fashioning us into His most beautiful Bride, worthy of the King of kings

... brilliantly sanctified, perfectly cleansed, gloriously adorned, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but ... holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:27).

That is as far as we'll go just now, but it is important to realise God will never forsake His people for He *will* see His purpose wrought in us and through us. ... He will never abandon you, no matter how rough life becomes. Whether it is the Sanballat's, the Tobiah's, the Geshem's, the wall-building, the gate-hanging, or any of the other fears and concerns which come our way ... He has a purpose in them all to bring us closer to Himself,

He gave me beauty for ashes, The oil of joy for mourning,
The garment of praise For the spirit of heaviness;
That we might be Trees of righteousness,
The planting of the Lord, That He might be glorified.