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Email: info@austin-sparks.net

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Concerning Jerusalem

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Nehemiah 1:1-11

In Ezra and Nehemiah which are really two halves of a whole, and they form one narrative, there is a sense in which the whole can be gathered up in three representative and symbolic things which are found there in Jerusalem, namely, the Altar, the House and the Wall. We may say that these three things represent Jerusalem, for when you come to look at the exercise of heart in Ezra and Nehemiah, it had its outworking and its expression almost, if not entirely, in connection with those three things. There were other phases and features but they were all directed toward these three things, the altar, the house and the wall. These three occupied their attention and their energies and so we may say that that is what is meant by Jerusalem, and it was a matter of concern for Jerusalem as gathered up in those three things. And when you ask for the spiritual and New Testament meaning of Jerusalem, the answer undoubtedly is that Jerusalem represents the inclusiveness and fulness of Christ. We might trace that right through the Word to very great profit. It is not our intention to do so at the moment, but if you are in need of a little bit of work with the Word at any time, I would suggest to you that you study Jerusalem in that light: the inclusiveness and fulness of Christ. And if you want to hasten your study to a swift conclusion, start in Revelation, for there the new Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem is undoubtedly the fulness of Christ.

When Nehemiah made his enquiry he learned of the state of ruin in which Jerusalem was. The altar was gone, the house had been destroyed, and the wall was broken down, until Ezra returned, replaced the altar, rebuilt the house, but still there was an imperfect representation of Christ there, and conditions were, therefore, unsatisfactory and heartbreaking. The altar gone; that resulted in spiritual defeat, for the altar was put in its place because fear was upon the people because of the peoples round about, so that the altar became the occasion of the removal of their fear, the symbol

of security, safety, deliverance, victory, but the altar gone, spiritual defeat follows. The house destroyed; then the heavenly life and fellowship and fulness of the Lord's people have gone, for the house comes in after the altar, as a heavenly thing, by way of the cross, as that in which the Lord's people have their fellowship and their fulness in heavenly life. The wall broken down; then the testimony of the fulness of Christ to the world has gone, and Jerusalem is in ruins and the Lord's testimony in its fulness as represented thereby is non-existent. The result amongst the Lord's people is a state of servitude, of that which represents a state of subjection to world powers, dishonour, that is, a loss of dignity, shame and reproach. And further, schism and strife amongst the Lord's people, for this book reveals a good deal of that amongst the Jews at Jerusalem and round about. And then poverty; terrible poverty. You read it through again and find how it was almost impossible for them to make ends meet. These are the consequences of an altar gone, and a house destroyed, and a wall broken down. They are always the consequences of that which is typified thereby. In a word, when the cross in the fulness of its meaning, is out of place, then there is spiritual defeat amongst the Lord's people. When the house, the truth of the House of God, the church, the Body of Christ has been overlooked, or ignored, or not apprehended and applied, the result is that the heavenly life and heavenly fellowship, and heavenly fulness have gone. And when the wall, the testimony of the Lord's fulness to His people, is broken down, then there is nothing to show to the world, the testimony to the world is destroyed.

The result for the Lord's people is that they are brought into a state of servitude, and this is by far the greater condition of Christian people today than the opposite. Christianity is in servitude to the world. It is almost going on its hands and knees to the world to allow it to exist. It is doing everything it can in order to get the favour of the world; it is in servitude, it is paying its tithes to the world. Whenever you see a notice or an advertisement about a sale, a whist drive or a bazaar, or something like that, you know that there there is servitude to the world, you know that the whole thing is in bondage to the world, you know that that thing cannot maintain itself in God, it can only maintain itself by going to the world, and it is having to beg its very life from the world; so much so that many Christian people are coming to feel that it is far too expensive to belong to a church, there are so many things to pay for. Oh, the shame of that, the reproach to the Lord, the indignity, the dishonour. And what about the strife and the schism amongst the Lord's people; and the spiritual poverty; that so few have anything to give of spiritual wealth and means and riches, to others. This is because the cross, in all its meaning of full victory and deliverance is not in its place. The altar has gone. It is because the great truth, the reality of the House of God, the Body of Christ is not in operation; that leads to strife, that leads to division and schism, that leads to spiritual poverty.

What is the opposite of spiritual poverty in this connection? Why, an assembly constituted on the principles of the Body of Christ in which everybody has something to give. The opposite of that is a congregation, with only one man preparing something day after day to give to the people, and if that man should fall sick there is not a soul in the congregation who can take the service or give a message, so they must rush round to find a preacher: the whole congregation is in spiritual poverty without a fragment of food to give. That is because the truth, the great truth of the House of God is not in operation. Get that truth in and all God's people are priests, and you all have something to give. Are you in the good of the truth of the House of God? Have you got spiritual riches and wealth? That is Jerusalem as the Lord wants it to be: the fulness of Christ.

And then the wall follows, and the wall is the outward circumferential expression of what is inside. That is, within the wall is the fulness of Christ, and the testimony of Christ as full satisfaction to His people is given out to the world; this is the testimony to the world that in Christ is full satisfaction. That is Jerusalem. And that was Nehemiah's concern, and Ezra's concern for Jerusalem, as they represented the complete meaning of Jerusalem in the cross, and the house of God and the

testimony to the nations of the fulness of Christ, by His cross in His House. But here it was not so; the world was in the ascendancy and Jerusalem was submerged. The people of God were spiritually divided and scattered. Now what we have here is the recovery, and Ezra and Nehemiah dealt with that whole state of things to recover the fulness of the Lord's testimony in Jerusalem, and what they recovered was typically, the fulness of Christ. And that is the end time concern of the Lord which He would put into the heart of an instrument in relation to His Coming again. A real concern for the recovery of the fulness of Christ, God's testimony in Christ to His inclusiveness and fulness.

What, again, is that fulness of Christ? It is the victory of His death as represented by the altar, the cross. The victory of Christ's death. We do not enlarge upon that very much at the moment but we must see that inasmuch as that altar in Jerusalem was the symbol of deliverance from, and safety in the presence of the enemies round about, the cross, the death of the Lord Jesus is the deliverance of His people from the power of darkness, the tyranny of the Devil, the forces of evil, and becomes the ground of their security even when the enemy is raging round. The death of Christ is our victory. The testimony to the cross is that in His death He triumphed. The mighty, mighty power in Christ's death to destroy death and him that had the power of death, that is the Devil. We want to let the full weight of that fall upon our hearts, "...that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage". His was a death, a Satan-destroying death, a delivering death from the power of the Devil. That is the cross, the altar. We need to ask the Lord to give us for ourselves the true inward understanding and knowledge of the power of Christ's death as the means of deliverance from Satan and death, and the "fear of death". "...and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage". He delivered through death. That is the first aspect of the fulness of Christ as revealed in His cross.

Then the power of His resurrection as represented by the House of God, or the Body of Christ, because it is the Body of Christ and the House of God which becomes the repository of the truth and power of His resurrection. The House is the result, as we have seen, of the cross. The Body of Christ comes into being through the cross, as the immediate issue of the cross, and into that Body He comes in the power of His resurrection; in the upper room in resurrection life and power He is found immediately in the midst. "...came Jesus and stood in the midst", and that represents for all this dispensation, the nature of the church. It is that in which Christ in the power of His resurrection, is dwelling, is residing. That is Jerusalem. That is the fulness of Christ as seen in the House.

And then the testimony of His sufficiency to His people as represented by the wall. The Lord is sufficient for His people, and it was at that that Nehemiah was aiming, to bring the people within the walls and say to them that the Lord was sufficient for them. And through all the conflict, all the trial and the difficulties and the perplexities and the upsettings which are seen in the course of the reconstructing of that wall, the one continuous note of optimism, praise and glorying on the part of Nehemiah was concerning the sufficiency of the Lord for the whole situation. He inspired the people with that and so in six months the whole work was finished because the people had a mind to work. They had that mind because Nehemiah inspired them with his own confidence in the Lord's sufficiency, and all without came to recognise that those they had called "these feeble Jews" had got a resource of fulness which was more than that of men, the fulness of the Lord; and that was the testimony outward to the fulness of Christ.

So Ezra and Nehemiah recovered typically, that which represented the fulness of Christ. And we apply that of course to see that that is what the Lord is seeking to do at an end time. Always the recovery is more difficult than the original constructing. When a thing has been lost it is always more difficult to get it back than it was to originally establish it. We come to the book of the Acts and we

see the thing coming in in life, spontaneously, in power. It was withstood, it was fought against, but there it stood in all its original glory and power and splendour. But it has been lost, and to recover always represents a very much greater task. So we find this book represents the difficulty of recovery. We are coming to see what those difficulties are in a moment. And then, recovery is not only marked by difficulties which are natural to a loss of position, but the recovery is also fraught with the opposition of every conceivable satanic device. If the Devil was behind the loss of the testimony we may be quite sure he will withstand its recovery with every means at his command. These are the two things which come up so fully in the book of Nehemiah: the difficulties of recovery from the inside and the withstanding of the enemy from the outside.

Let us look at some of these difficulties, the difficulties of recovery. There is one phrase which indicates an initial difficulty for Nehemiah. As he went round in his secret personal investigation by night, having told no one, personally and secretly exercising himself over this whole matter, one phrase which is used about the situation is this: "...there is much rubbish", and that is always a characteristic of recovery. You do not have that in the same sense in the original setting up or constituting, you have more or less a clear way for your new thing, but when it is renewing a thing you find that in the meantime a good deal of rubbish has accumulated, and in the place where the wall once was, now there is much rubbish. And remember that that wall stands to represent the clear definition of what is of God and what is not of God. It defines the point where what is of God ends and what is not of God begins, but it is a clear mark by division. Now when Nehemiah came to the place which was once marked so definitely, so precisely, so clearly and you could say: "God's things end there, and the world's things begin there, and that wall divides between clearly", that very place which was once the clear mark of definition and division and separation has on it all kinds of rubbish. That is, the clear definition has gone, you do not know where what is of God's things end and what is of the world begins. There is such an overlapping and intermixture, such a confusion, such a mess that the clear definition is lost. "...much rubbish".

It might be dangerous to try and apply that exhaustively - but man, even religiously, has put a very good deal upon what once represented God's clear line of demarcation that even Christian people do not know where they are today. Man has constructed his own interpretations of Christianity and of truth, brought in his own systems and has confused things so much that you really do not know unless you have clear discernment such as Nehemiah had, what is of God and what is not of God. There are multitudes of good, honest, sincere Christian people who really are in the most awful fog as to what is of God and what is not of God religiously. Man's religious systems have brought about that confusion and multitudes of honest people believe with all their heart that the thing that they are in is of God, and it is just possible for them to get such an awakening to see the whole thing was man-made and not of God at all. "...much rubbish". Paul was one of those. Reflect upon his past life, privileges, inheritances which he at one time believed were so utterly and absolutely of God, for him, and that he really was in God's will. He came to a time and he said: "The things which were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ". "...for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but refuse, that I may gain Christ"; and yet he was so devoted to all that as a traditional religious system in which he at one time was living as out from God, which had now become merely an outward thing of forms and external laws. He believed, nevertheless, that it was all of God until the light shone, until he saw that in comparison with the fulness of Christ it was refuse. It is a strong word that he uses; the word he uses is "stuff to be flung to the dogs". Saul of Tarsus throwing his Judaism to the dogs! He did it when he saw Christ. You can never come out of the rubbish until you see Christ.

Ask the Lord to reveal to you the fulness of Christ and you will find things which have gripped and held you become as mere refuse, stuff to be flung to the dogs. There was much rubbish in the place

which once represented a clear line of division between what was of God and what was not of God; confusion, mixture. I shall not attempt to apply that more thoroughly. The Lord will have to show us by revelation, what the rubbish is, but there is the simple statement and it contains a truth, and you and I will really have to ask the Lord to show us even in religious matters, where man ends and God begins, or where God ends and man begins, so that we shall be delivered from everything that man has imposed or added upon what is of God, and we shall be able to get right down to foundations, the rubbish being removed: and there is a very great deal of ecclesiastical rubbish about in these days that must go. That is a real difficulty in recovering the full testimony of the Lord Jesus. It is the longstanding systems of man religiously, the traditions of men, that which man has brought into Christianity and said: "This is of God". To get a full testimony to the Lord Jesus you come up against that very truly and very severely, and you find that people are met with the great obstruction of their inheritances and their acceptances before they can get right into the fulness of the Lord Jesus. It takes a long time to clear that rubbish away - it does.

Then the second thing was their past history which would tend to be a ground of great discouragement, even despair, and throw them into a state of inertia, paralysis. They would look back over the past and they would say: "Yes, the good old days, they will never come back, we cannot expect to have things again as they were; they are gone for ever." "What is the good of trying to recover?" You find plenty of people today who, in the face of a divinely inspired effort to recover the fulness of the testimony of Christ in His Body, will say: "Oh yes, but there have been many things like that in the past centuries, a good many people have tried that and it has always failed". "So-and-so led a movement like that, and another time there was another thing that said that was its object, and there have been plenty of attempts along that line but history shows they do not succeed and one after another they break down; what is the good?" You see there is a history, and a bad history of the church, and there are plenty of people today who fall into despair and say: "Well, the only thing is for us to live as individual believers and never have anything corporate, and try and be personally faithful to the Lord". That is a counsel of despair. It is quite contrary to the Lord, that. We are not thinking of a great world movement, of a great public thing, but if it can only be in a company of a dozen that the Lord has some real fulness of realization of His end, that is the contradiction to all these counsels of despair, and that is God's answer to the work of the Devil. And do you think that it is right for us to sit down and tell the Lord that He started to do a thing and the whole thing has been spoiled and it is no use Him trying to do it? "Lord, at the beginning Your plan, Your way was to have Your full thought and desire as represented by little companies here and there; things went wrong, Your object was spoiled, the Devil came in and upset it, and it is quite impossible for You to realize any such idea or ideal." Are you prepared to thrust that upon the Lord? Not a bit. Nehemiah will not accept that, and Nehemiah represents the spirit of an end time movement and says: "Well, if it only be in a small company here and there and somewhere else, God can have that which satisfies His heart, and if God's heart satisfaction is to be realized in that way then it is our business and we must not be discouraged by past history." We recall movements in past days which were great movements, blessed movements and represented something very rich for the Lord and then were upset and arrested and so we say: "Well, it is no use our attempting anything, the same result will follow." That is contrary to the spirit of Nehemiah. A Nehemiah instrument repudiates all such arguments and counsels, and says: "Although the thing has failed a thousand times, God is still able to do that upon which He has set His heart" - and the answer at long last to all the work of the Devil, will be that God has that which He has set His heart upon. God cannot be defeated. When you and I get to glory and we see what God has got there, we shall say: "This is that upon which the Lord set His heart; here it is..." "It seemed to us as though it had become non-existent and quite impossible; it looked to us as though the enemy had destroyed the whole thing - but here it is." God will answer the whole works of the Devil and have finally that which He has set his heart upon. Are we with Him in that faith and confidence? What He will have at long last,

He can have at least in a measure now in small representations here and there, His own desire and thought. The conditions are such that if you listen to the pessimist you will never attempt anything along that line; if you listen to those who talk of "the good old days" which can never come again, you will be paralysed.

The third difficulty - men in the flesh are so much in possession. Men in the flesh have taken possession of the Lord's territory and the Lord's things. Do we not find ourselves up against difficulties like that? The difficulty of religious vested interests of so many people; their office and their position and their reputation and their name and their a thousand other things. Man has got in God's way and in God's place, and so you find yourself up against those personal interests of so many people in the work of the Lord, that the recovery of the full testimony of the Lord Jesus is made exceedingly difficult. Nehemiah found that.

We see the conditions in this book were that there were those there who had taken possession and who had position and they arrested the activities of Nehemiah, the nobles and others. Well now, we come up against that thing. You are out to have something which is wholly of the Lord and you find people in the way, men and women in the flesh making difficulties. The necessity so often is for the Lord to break the man or to put them out. Is not that the difficulty? They have got hold, they are running this thing, this is their work, it circles round them, they were the founders of it and it lives and it dies with them. Now if you want something of the universality of Christ, the pre-eminence of Christ, which has no place for man but which place is wholly occupied by the Lord Jesus, either those men and women in the flesh have got to be smashed, ground to powder, or else the Lord has got to put them out or else He can do nothing - and that is a difficulty always in recovery.

And the fourth thing was the impoverishment of the Lord's people: the domination of the world. Nehemiah found such an impoverishment amongst the people at Jerusalem. That represented for him a very great difficulty to recover the testimony. We have referred to the domination of the world, and therefore, the resultant impoverishment of the Lord's people. These two things always go together. We know it from experience, that if the world has a place in our lives, or in what is called the church, spiritual impoverishment will be found there, spiritual poverty. When the world is ruled out absolutely and Christ is all and in all, there are always the riches of Christ, there is always the means of God to carry on. We have often said that when we go down to Egypt the Lord lets us take the responsibility for carrying things on. When we repudiate Egypt and put our confidence in the Lord and make Him our resource He takes the responsibility for carrying on. And that is a testimony true to life. We, without any boasting at all, or rejoicing or glorying in the flesh, are able to bear our witness very, very definitely to that. There was a time in our history when we went down into Egypt, when we had to draw our resources from the world to carry on what we called the church work. There was a blessed time in our history when the Lord gave us to repudiate Egypt and to stop the whole programme of appeals to the world along any line whatever, and turn to Him and give Him His place, and from that day to this He has supported us and carried on, and we have lacked nothing; but more, we are a constant amazement to others as to where the resources come from. That is no boast in the flesh, I do not want it to sound like that; it is a testimony, and it is given to reinforce the truth of what we are saying. The ability which the Lord gives to do much more for others when He has His full place is amazing. Then you are not going cap in hand to the world, you have got something to give to the world, you have the knowledge of the fulness of Christ and your walls are up, your testimony outward is established and you need not draw from the world for anything, but you have got something to give to the world and the world is in poverty in comparison. But here was impoverishment because the Lord had not His full place and the walls were down. But that is a difficulty always.

We have not touched the satanic side of this recovery but we can leave that till later. The Lord just give us that clear perception, apprehension to see what His thought is and to have the positive note. I feel that we need to recognise the value of a positive note. We are not going to denounce this and that and have the negative note all the time, we must have that positive side of things that because we have got what we have, by sheer comparison others may be compelled to see that their position is not a right one. Not because we say they are wrong, not because we are always preaching that they are wrong but because they have to see without anything that may come from our lips, that we have got the secret. That is the way of effectiveness. We have got the secret, and the secret is the Lord Himself. May the Lord lead us into His fulness, the fulness of Christ our full satisfaction.