

February 28

Scriptures: Read Nehemiah 13

Key Verse: “Thus I cleansed them of everything pagan...” (Nehemiah 13:30)

Overview

On the same day the walls of Jerusalem were dedicated to the Lord, a passage from the Holy Scripture was read. Providentially, it was about the exclusion of the Ammonites and Moabites from the congregation of the Lord (Deuteronomy 23:3-4), for the Lord knew the weakness of His people in the area of close association with the heathen.

For the third time, there was a large-scale separation from the “mixed multitude” (v. 3). The first separation was initiated by Ezra about thirteen years before (Ezra 10:19), but the problem of intermarriage with the heathen persisted. The second one was more recent, occurring under Nehemiah’s leadership at the time of the ratification of the covenant (10:30); and now on the occasion of the wall’s dedication, the people once again committed themselves to a separation, that they might live undefiled before the Lord (v. 3).

At this point, after having been governor in Judea for twelve years (13:6; 5:14), Nehemiah must have felt that all his reforms were put into effect and that it was now safe for him to return to Babylon to give a report to King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah must have had an extended stay in Babylon, possibly for several years, since during his time away the spiritual condition of the people in Judea disintegrated. When Nehemiah returned, he found that his reforms were not being carried out. Without his presence, there was no strong leadership. The high priest, Eliashib, was not a good spiritual leader; rather, he led the people back into sin by close association with the heathen.

Eliashib “was allied with Tobiah” who was an Ammonite (2:10). The Hebrew word translated “allied” can refer to a family tie. It is possible that Eliashib was related to Tobiah through marriage (cf. 6:18). It is hard to imagine how Eliashib could do such an evil thing as removing the sacred articles from the Temple to make room for a heathen, especially since Tobiah was one of the leaders who opposed Nehemiah’s rebuilding project (2:10, 19; 4:3, 7; 6:1, 14, 19).

Satan is indeed as sly as a fox. When he could not come against them directly, he put on the mask of friendship and made his way in as an angel of light. The heathen presence of Tobiah not only led to sin within the community but also defiled the rooms of the Temple where he had been staying. After throwing out Tobiah’s personal belongings, Nehemiah ordered the rooms to be ceremonially cleansed (v. 9). His zealotry for the House of God is similar to that of Jesus when He cleansed the Temple (Matthew 21:12-13). Sin must be removed and cleansed in order to restore the proper worship of God.

The very things that the Jews had promised by an oath not to do (10:30-39) they were doing. They withheld their tithes, offerings, and firstfruits from the Levites who were then forced to leave the Temple service and work in the fields. The people desecrated the Sabbath by doing business with heathen merchants and intermarrying with the heathen.

Nehemiah's reaction was one of righteous indignation, anger, and tremendous zealotry to ensure that the commands of the Lord were obeyed. He confronted the community leaders with their irresponsibility in not seeing that the worship of the Lord was continued, and he proceeded to restore the Temple service. With violence, he threatened the heathen businessmen to not conduct business on the Sabbath (v. 21), and he dealt drastically with those who had taken foreign wives (v. 25). Even the son of the high priest, one who should know better, had deliberately broken God's Law by taking a heathen wife from the family of Sanballat (who was with Tobiah in opposing the rebuilding of Jerusalem). The holy seed was not to be profaned (Leviticus 21:7, 14-15), therefore Nehemiah punished him with excommunication. Nehemiah knew the terrible results of intermarriage: idolatry and eventually the loss of Jewish uniqueness. Already there were many children who could not speak the Hebrew language because of the influence of their foreign mothers, something which appalled Nehemiah (v. 24). His only course of action was to enforce another separation from the heathen.

Throughout these new reforms, Nehemiah often went to the Lord in prayer. He understood that God was the Judge, and he would repay those who had sinned. Although this last chapter of Nehemiah is full of despair because of the sins of the people, it ends on a note of hope for Nehemiah, since he faithfully obeyed the Lord. He knew that God was the One who blessed, so he asked that God remember the good things he had done, that he might be blessed with greater spiritual blessings (vv. 14, 22b, 31). The Lord answered his prayer; he was remembered "for good" by the Lord inspiring Him to write a part of God's Holy Word, which is a blessing to people even today.

Prayer

O Lord, we do not have the absolute authority over society as Nehemiah had, but we do have the power over our own lives. Help us to bring our attitudes and actions under the control of Your Word so that we may please You in all things.