

End-Time Conditions

by T. Austin-Sparks

The book of Nehemiah represents an end-time activity and a call to the Lord's people to live in their own title, to maintain the heavenly order, and to enter into the rest of the finished work of Christ.

Scripture: Ezra 3:3, Nehemiah 5:1, Ephesians 2:6, Colossians 2:15

Topics: "Spiritual Distinctiveness", "End-Time Conditions"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of the Book of Nehemiah as a representation of end-time conditions, linking it to the coming of the Lord and the need for God's people to recognize and address the spiritual decline around them. He outlines the divine order of the altar, the house, and the wall, illustrating how the Cross is foundational for deliverance and the establishment of a heavenly order among God's people. Sparks warns against the dangers of mixture, oppression, and neglect of spiritual distinctiveness, urging believers to return to their own rights in Christ and to uphold the purity of the testimony of the Church. He calls for a recovery of the Sabbath rest, which symbolizes the completion of God's work in Christ, and challenges the congregation to examine their spiritual state and commitment to God's purposes in these end times.

Transcript

For some time past the Lord has been laying the message of this book upon my heart, and I believe the time has come for that message to be brought anew to His people. I believe that in this book there is that which can touch the need at this present time in a very real way; for, indeed, this is a time when the Lord's people need help to meet the many activities which are meant by the adversary to lead them away from, or prevent them from coming to, the place where the Lord has all that His heart desires in and through them. This first part will be occupied with a few general principles which govern the book.

The first is that this book represents an end-time activity. You know that this is the last fragment of recorded history before you reach the Gospel of Luke. Whether that has impressed you sufficiently I do not know, but it is indeed an impressive fact that the next piece of recorded history in the Canon of Holy Scripture, as we have it, is the Gospel of Luke. Thus what you have here, so far as the old dispensation is concerned, is an end-time activity. The content of this book represents what God did at the end of that dispensation, and will therefore foreshadow what an end-time activity of God is to be. It will show the kind of thing that the Lord will do in the end-time.

And then the other thing, which goes along with it, is that the Book of Nehemiah is related throughout to the Coming of the Lord. Luke brings in the Lord Jesus in a very immediate way, and we find Him in the temple surrounded by the few who represent the remnant which has come over from the old dispensation and which takes up the testimony in the new - for the testimony was indeed represented by a very few when the Lord Jesus came; Simeon and Anna and a few others who looked for the consolation of Israel, for the Lord's Christ. They are found there with the Lord in His House in the Gospel of Luke, and as that is the next fragment of history, and as Nehemiah was the last before that, you will see that the link with Nehemiah is the Coming of the Lord.

Putting these two things together, you have your foundation laid for the abiding value of this book. It is an end-time activity related to the Coming of the Lord.

Now we go to the book, and in a few further observations we take note of what we might call the typology of this book, that is, its typical elements and features. Indeed, we have to link another book with it, for the two are one. These are Ezra and Nehemiah, and in the Hebrew Scriptures they were not separated, but one was regarded as the completion of the other. In Ezra, as we know, we have the House of God in view; in Nehemiah we have the enclosure, the wall of Jerusalem; and these two speak to us of the testimony of the Lord as here on the earth.

The Divine Order: the Altar; the House; the Wall

In Ezra we find the order introduced. The first feature of the order of things is the setting of the altar, the great altar, in its place: "And they set the altar in its place" (Ezra 3:3; A.R.V. margin). Then after the altar was put in its place, the House of God was built; then when the House was built, at a subsequent time the wall was re-built. This is the three-fold order. First we have the altar, which typifies the Cross, as being basic to the whole Divine activity, and then the House, which typifies the Church, as resultant from the Cross being in its place. It is important to have the aspect of things as well as the order. The House is here presented in its Godward direction, what it is to God, and what it is in itself. And then the wall is the testimony manward, towards the world. That is the order and the aspect of things. Let us gather them up again very briefly: the Altar - the Cross, basic to the whole Divine activity; the House - the Church, resultant from the Cross, issuing therefrom, in its Godward aspect and as to what it is in itself; and then the Wall as the testimony of the Cross and the House, outwardly, toward man and the world.

The Cross - Basic Victory

You will have noted that the Cross is here seen as a basic deliverance from all hostile forces. That does not mean that the hostile forces cease to be, or cease to trouble. They are not annihilated by the Cross, they are very much in evidence afterward. But there is a factor about the Cross here which represents basic deliverance from the hostile forces. Ezra 3:3, tells us that they put the altar in its place: "... for fear was upon them because of the peoples of the countries". So that their fear of the peoples led them to that step. Working the other way it meant, or implied, that the Cross - the altar - was the ground of their security, their safety, and their deliverance from the hostile peoples round about. The Cross is basic to deliverance. The forces will not cease to trouble; the antagonism of the enemy will not become a thing of naught; there may be a good deal of challenging, pressing and assailing, but there is that basic thing in the Cross which speaks of security, safety and deliverance. By the Cross, says the Apostle, He triumphed: "having put off from Himself the principalities and the powers, He made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it (His Cross)" (Col. 2:15; A.R.V. margin). You have the basic thing in the Cross.

The House - Heavenly Order

The House sees a heavenly order set up in the Lord's people. That is the resultant work of the Cross, the issue of the Cross, because until the Cross has done its work nothing heavenly can be brought in. The Letter to the Ephesians sees us in the heavenlies, where we have been quickened together with Him, and raised, and seated; but quickening has to do with none but those who have died. So that the Cross sees an order of the earth and of man set aside; and, therefore, the House of God, coming in after the Cross, represents a heavenly order, not of man, set up in the Lord's people.

The Wall - the Testimony Outward

Then the wall determines the testimony of the Lord, the divide as to the world, and as to mere professors. If I were asked to define the testimony here I should say that it is the testimony of what is in resurrection. These walls were "raised again". They speak of that which is brought back from destruction, disintegration and death, and reconstituted. But they are in association with the heavens in a marked way, and the feature which they represent preeminently is that of distinctiveness. It is a distinctiveness of testimony as represented by what is raised, what is in resurrection. There is a tremendous difference between that and what has died, what has been and is no more. The testimony of resurrection life and nature is something very distinct. So the wall represents distinctiveness of testimony as characterized by what is risen and of the heavens.

Now having said all that in a general way as introductory, we are able to go on with the book more fully, and we shall take as our first matter of consideration things as they were when Nehemiah came to Jerusalem. We shall follow afterward with Nehemiah himself as the vessel of recovery, and then after that with the way of recovery. But I think that we may not get much beyond the summarizing of "things as they were". Each feature, I am sure, will in itself be very challenging to our hearts, and to our day.

I would like to say here, by way of parenthesis, that it is not for one moment my desire merely to accumulate truth or Bible matter for the sake of an address, a theme, but very truly that the Lord may be able at this end-time to get that which He is after, and that as we speak of these things the Holy Spirit may strike them home to us in relation to His own purpose.

Things as They Were

Now, coming back to this book, and reading it through and marking the things which represented the conditions in Nehemiah's time, you will find that there is presented a very deplorable state of affairs. In the first place, the clear testimony of the House of God has broken down. The things resisted by Ezra have recurred and revived. That beautiful movement which is presented in Ezra's account, that recovery of truth as to the House of God; that putting away of things which were contrary to that testimony and that House, has all collapsed and the old evils have raised their heads again; the testimony is in a state of weakness and ineffectiveness.

As we read through the book of Nehemiah with Ezra in the background, having Ezra freshly in mind with all that is there, we shall be startled and amazed that here in the day of Nehemiah such things were unrecognized, only coming to light when Nehemiah comes on the scene to do something which is according to God's mind. It is always like that. You never know what there is of evil and of that which is contrary to God until you come out in some whole-hearted purpose for God, and then you discover things that you would not have believed to be existent before. These things are quiescent, they are hidden, they

are going on quietly, holding and gripping the life of the people, destroying the testimony of the Lord, and they only spring into manifest life and activity when something positive for God comes into the midst.

Oppression

Look at some of these things. Many of the Lord's people (speaking historically here, we should say the Jews) had been sold into slavery among their own brethren. The Lord's people were making merchandise of one another, were seeking their own good and gain at the expense of their brethren, maintaining their own position by the humiliation and degradation of their own brethren; and I am very far from sure that that has not a spiritual counterpart. I do not know what some people would do if they had not others over whom they could lord it, and were not able to turn even God's heritage to their own good and account. This works out from simple forms to extreme forms. It may work out in the simple form of that unholy, unlovely criticism amongst the Lord's people, which after all only implies that we are better than they, and bolsters us up at their expense. I wonder how much of our criticism of one another does not secretly have that motive.

Oh, that eternal, everlasting 'but'; always a reservation! 'You know they love the Lord, but...': 'They are very zealous for the Lord, but...': 'There is all that is good about them, but'; and that 'but' looms bigger than all the good, and undermines all the good.

So many of us who use that 'but' are only prompted to do so by our superior judgment, by our pride. I mean this, that too often we get on top by making others appear small; and we gain, or seek to gain, our prominence, our position, our influence by that form of pride which does harm to the children of God. That may be a simple illustration of this thing spiritually.

The whole force of the exhortations of the New Testament is in the other direction. The emphasis is that we should put others above ourselves, that we should always be esteeming others better than ourselves. That is the opposite direction. That is very hard for the flesh to do, and you see why we have to stress the fact that if the testimony of a heavenly thing in the House of God is to be maintained in fullness and clearness, the Cross has to come first and to go right to the root of this pride, this arrogance, this subtle self-sufficiency, self-esteem, this "humble" (?) criticism of ours which, after all, is the very essence of pride; and it may show itself in many other ways, as indeed it does; lording it over God's heritage; taking position and making the very privileges and opportunities of service the occasion for our position.

To put that in another way, in the New Testament form, it is this: the disciples, before they were baptized with the Holy Spirit were men who were always looking out for an opportunity of being on top of their brethren, and of having the advantage over one another, having first place; and the Lord Jesus had to say to them strong words: "I am among you as He that serveth"; "... the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister..." That is the spirit of the Cross. Now I think you can see that there is undoubtedly a spiritual counterpart to this, where others are made the means of our gain, where we in a spiritual sense sell our brethren into slavery for our own advantage. You may follow that further if you desire.

Insolvency

Another thing which comes out in this book is that many of the Lord's people, the Jews, were living in insolvency, partly by reason of mortgages, or by the selling of their sons and daughters into servitude. That is to say, they were not living in their own rights. They were reduced to poverty and they had no resources of their own; therefore dignity and honour were absent, and they were a debtor people.

That also has a spiritual counterpart. I wonder, beloved, how far it is true of ourselves, and of many of the Lord's people today, that they are not living in their own title; that, were things brought to the balance, they would be found insolvent. To put it more simply, how many of us know in ourselves the riches of Christ, and how many of us are in that false position of having to live upon other people's riches? I mean this, that if all the external things of spiritual help were stripped off; the meetings, and the fellowship, and all these things were taken away, how many of us would discover that we were living in our own title and, in the last analysis, absolutely independent of all such things? While we may enjoy them, profit by them, thank God for them, yet it is not things on the outside which constitute our life, it is our own knowledge of the preciousness of the Lord, and, though everything of the outside be stripped from us, we are solvent, we can stand up and say: 'Yes, but you cannot take away my own heritage; I have a heritage in Christ which is not dependent upon meetings, conferences, addresses, or upon anything on the outside, but which is my own inward life with the Lord; I know Him'.

It may just be the case in the end-time, beloved, that the Lord will call many of His people to face situations like that for their own discovery, their own finding out. I am quite sure that the Lord will require at the end-time, that every child of His shall know Him in a personal, inward way to his own sufficiency and satisfaction in Christ. And that although outward things may be removed, may collapse, may disappoint, we find fullness in Christ for ourselves.

Are you solvent? Are you mortgaged? Are you living entirely upon what other people have to give you? Is that your sustenance? Or, are you living upon what you get from the Lord? If so, if you have something as your own, you will have something to give, and you are not in the state of beggary, poverty, such as these people were in. I am so glad that Nehemiah redeemed the people who were sold into slavery, and bought them back into their own rights. I am so glad that Nehemiah stopped this business of mortgaging and selling their children to maintain their own lives, and saw to it that every man could stand on his own feet before God, and pay his own way. That is an important spiritual reflection for the Lord's people, and that represents an end-time movement, for we have lived far too long upon mere externals of grace, and far too little upon what the Lord Himself is to us.

The House of God Defiled

Then the temple had been polluted by the heathen and had been used for secular purposes. I think that hardly need be applied, the two things go together. When those who are not of pure blood by direct birth from above, heathen in this sense that they are not born children of God, come into the House of God, and have a place amongst the Lord's people, you very soon find that the House of the Lord is turned in the direction of interests and usages which are altogether contrary to the mind of the Lord. It is brought down to earth; the House of God is made an earthly thing, drawn out of its place. The enemy is always trying to do this. It is his persistent strategy to insinuate amongst the Lord's people those who are not really born again, those who assume and presume; who would come in as of the Lord's people, but who are not the Lord's people; and the issue of their presence is to introduce into the House of God worldly judgments, worldly methods, man's ways, man's thoughts, and so pull it down on to the lower, the carnal level of life. That is persistently, and too often successfully, attempted as one of the Devil's master-strokes. Surely we see that today, for it is very widespread. You hardly need to be told that; we are aware of it all round.

But Nehemiah, as representing God's end-time movement, put a stop to that. He purged the House of God of the heathen, and saw to it that the House of God was maintained according to God's thought, and that man's thought and man's way was ruled out. No one thinks, of course, that I am talking about the

House of God in any material sense, of churches and places where people gather. That may be an application of this; but I am thinking of the people of God, who are called to be for Him a heavenly people; into the midst of whom the enemy is constantly trying to get carnal principles, natural activities and energies to pull this testimony down from the heavenlies and make of it an earthly thing run by man. Nehemiah will not have that; he counters that, and so, represents what God will have at the end-time.

The Sabbath Violated

Then again, the Sabbath was neglected. This is an extraordinary thing after Ezra, is it not, that the Sabbath should have fallen out of its place, be neglected, set aside, overlooked, ignored. Let us hasten at once to say that we are thinking now of the spiritual and New Testament counterpart of this; not of a day. While we do still thank God for the Sabbath day as a point of time here, and while we would cling to it and not let it go easily, we have been lifted in our understanding of this to a much higher level, and we have come to see that the Sabbath is the historical type of the end of God's works when He enters into His rest in the Lord Jesus; that the Sabbath speaks of a full accomplishment of all God's work in the Person of His Son. Set aside, overlook, ignore the finality of Divine activity in Christ, and you have lost your rest, you have lost your peace; you are still wandering in a circle in a wilderness; you are still in the realm of the imperfect and unaccomplished; you have not yet come to settle down on that ground which proclaims the word "It is finished".

The soul that really apprehends spiritually the finished work of Christ, is a soul at rest; it has entered into God's rest. It is delivered from the tyranny of the Devil who is always seeking to bring accusation and condemnation, despite the fact that the finished work of Christ says there is no condemnation. All this restless, feverish introspection, self-analysis, self-encompassing; never at rest, never settled, never sure, never certain of anything; all this is because the Sabbath has been overlooked. For us the Sabbath is a Person and not a day, and therefore every day should be to us a Sabbath. That is the deepest meaning, I am sure, of this magnificent word which we all quote as a fragment of Scripture, a text, "The joy of the Lord is your strength".

What is the joy of the Lord? "God... rested from all His work..."; "God saw everything that He had made, and behold it was very good"; and that all-inclusively is Christ in His full work by His Cross. God has looked upon the new creation in Christ and said: "It is good". "The joy of the Lord is your strength". The finality of God's satisfaction is in Christ. Overlook that, miss that, and you have lost your Sabbath rest, your rest of heart. That is how it was here. But Nehemiah brought that back, and an end-time movement represents the recovery of the finality of Christ's work, the fullness of His satisfaction to the Father, and the people of God being brought into that. Oh, beloved, the importance of that can never be overestimated, because against that the adversary is dead set.

I see two movements as marking the end-time, and they are these. On the one hand, the enemy is trying to rob the people of God of their rest, assurance, peace, certainty, confidence, and circling them round with doubts, fears, apprehensiveness of things, to cut the ground of confidence from under their feet - the Accuser of the brethren comes out in that way at the end-time in an intensified form. Over against that, God would bring back the fullness and finality of His work in Christ, set His people in their Sabbath rest, directing their hearts toward Him, saying: "This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased": 'You are accepted in Him, I am satisfied'. It is all in Him. Bring back that testimony of the Lord Jesus at the end-time, and it is a great countering factor. "Nehemiah", be he a man or be he a corporate instrument for recovery at the end-time, must have as a part, an important part, of his ministry the establishing of the

Sabbath in this sense.

Mixture and Lost Distinctiveness

Then, again, we find here that many of the Lord's people had married foreign wives and thus their distinctiveness was lost. Nehemiah destroyed those unions, and compelled such as had thus transgressed to send back their wives to their own homes and countries, thus upholding a Divine principle. Now the spiritual counterpart is not that those who have unconverted husbands or wives should leave them, or neglect them, though I am afraid that many are doing that. Because the husband or wife has not the things of the Lord, the interests of the Lord at heart, they go out to many meetings and leave them alone. Do not fall into that trap. No, the spiritual counterpart is that these wives in the Old Testament always represent principles. Women, as we know, throughout the Bible are types of principles, and what is here typified is alliance, and relationship, and association with principles which are foreign to what is wholly of God; and any voluntary association with those principles destroys that spiritual distinctiveness which must ever characterize the Lord's people.

That covers a very wide area and includes innumerable things, but that is the inclusive application of this. What we have here is an element, a feature, a principle, a law that is contrary to the revealed will of God, which is foreign and alien to the mind of the Lord, to the Word of God, to the way of the Spirit; what is in view here is a voluntary association with that, an allowing that to come into relationship with ourselves. As the result of such a course, there will be an offspring which is a mixture, which has a mixture of things of God and things of the enemy; and if there is one paramount abomination to God as revealed in the Word of God it is mixture.

Everywhere God is against mixture. God will have things utter, complete, absolute, clearly defined, wholly of Himself; and this wall of Nehemiah represents the mark which divides between what is wholly of God, and what is not of God; it is not just a matter of the different shades and degrees of what is not of God, but what is not of God to the finest degree. What is inside is to be of God to the very last measure, and anything that is not of God has no place there. And so these wives must be expelled from that area and sent away. It is a spiritual principle which is in view. God is against mixture. There is a terrible amount of mixture amongst the Lord's people.

Suburban Christians

There are, perhaps, two other things to be mentioned. The majority of the people we find here were living outside Jerusalem, in the suburbs, and Nehemiah had not enough people in Jerusalem for the work in hand, and had to appeal to them, encourage them, exhort them, to go out to bring others in. That is a very simple thing in its spiritual interpretation, and yet an important thing. There are a good many of the Lord's people living in the spiritual suburbs; who are not right inside His testimony. They may be only a little way out, but they are out; they may be a long way out. There may be all manner of - shall we say - reasons which they would give. Some would say that they did not want to be singular, they did not want to seem to be unbalanced, they want to keep the balance of things. Yes, all kinds of reasons (?) would be advanced. It may be prejudice, it may be suspicion, it may be keeping on the safe side of the road, it may be fear of the cost, unwillingness to pay the price. It may be that Sanballat and Tobiah will look unfavourably at them if they come inside and co-operate with Nehemiah. It may be that they are not quite sure about this thing; they want to see how it is going to fare, if it is going to succeed, and if they see the thing is solid ground they will take the risk! There is no risk if the thing is solid, and therefore there is no heroism and no honour.

You see what I mean. When the Lord does a new thing, and the Lord is seeking to have His utter testimony to what is altogether of Himself and of heaven, where man, in the flesh, in nature, has no place, a thing which is wholly of the Lord, it involves cost, loss of favour, loss of friends; it involves misunderstanding, misrepresentation; it involves in criticism, in the judgments of being extreme and singular and different from everyone else; all that! Yes? Well, what of it? The issue is, are you going to be wholly in with God, or are you going to remain in the suburbs? Nehemiah would urge, would exhort, would entreat, would encourage, would reach out, would call in; and blessed be God! there was a response adequate to the need. It remains for us to decide in our own hearts, whether we are on the fringe of things, on the outskirts, on the rim, or whether we are right in, and taking the consequences of such a position; and we shall just have to square right down to this issue.

Some of us have had to do that. We had seen what it would involve, what it would cost; at least we had seen a good deal of the inevitable practical outcome of taking that course with God. Yes, but the issue has just been this: "Was it the way of the Lord?" If so, to be out of it could not pay in the long run; whatever we might have for the time being, it must be lost sooner or later.

Certainly we must not view things merely upon that low level - gain and loss - but after all it is the question of what we are here for - for the Lord, or for ourselves? For the Lord, or for others? The whole question is, "What does the Lord want?" Then, it may be costly, it may mean much, it may mean loss of fellowship in many directions, loss of favour, and we may be involving ourselves in the terrific animus - hostility - of the enemy; but what can we do? We must go on with God. Are we all at that place? That is bringing things very close to our hearts, is it not?

Official Obstruction

Then, in closing; all these things which we have mentioned as being the wrongs, the evils, which Nehemiah encountered; which existed, but of which no notice was taken until he came on the scene, all these things were supported by an important, influential and official class, priests and nobles, and even the high priest himself was a party to them. Nehemiah came right up against that. Well, it is quite true that, when we determine to go right on with the Lord, it is the official element that obstructs. We meet an influential force, we come right up against those who have place and position and we find too often that, like the high priest, even those who officially represent, and are accepted as the representatives of God's highest interests are not favourable toward the whole counsel of God, the whole purpose of God, but condone things which are altogether contrary to His full testimony. That is very true. Some of you have proved it, and will know it if you determine to go right on with the Lord.

But Nehemiah met it all, and he met it with courage. "Then I contended with the nobles", he said. He did not grovel before the influential class, he did not bow to the official elements; he contended with the nobles. He knew that he was a man with a Divine mandate, and that gave him spiritual, not merely natural, dignity amongst men, because as he stood upon his Divinely-given ground, to fulfil his Divinely-given ministry, he knew that God would stand by him.

We shall see there were other factors in the background which made him the man he was; but that was his attitude. It is a great thing to know you are in the purpose of God. You have great confidence when you know you are in a Divine activity; that the thing you are in was not initiated by you, but came from heaven, and you came into it from heaven, spiritually; the thing is of God. It puts you in a position of moral and spiritual ascendancy, and gives you a dignity above that of men whose dignity is merely official, and not

spiritual.

Now you have been making your application as we have gone along. We must come back and see this instrument of recovery, and the method of recovery more fully. I do trust that the Lord will enable you to see that we are in an end-time, related to the Coming of the Lord, and that an end-time activity is the raising of a testimony of distinctiveness, that is, that which is in resurrection life and power, a thing all of God, with nothing of man in it. And that testimony demands that a very great deal that is contrary to it shall be dealt with and put away.

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