

Recovery - Part 1 of 4

by T. Austin-Sparks

The book of Nehemiah is a microcosm of the conflict of all the ages, showing God's sovereignty and commitment to His people in the face of opposition and adversity.

Duration: 54:05

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Acts 15:14, Ephesians 2:19, Hebrews 4:12, 1 Peter 2:9, Revelation 21:2

Topics: "Recovery"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the book of Nehemiah and its significance in the history of God's people. The book is divided into three main sections, each representing a different aspect of the people's journey. Firstly, it highlights the loss of influence due to the people's lack of spirituality and their adoption of worldly values. Secondly, it covers a period of captivity and discipline, with the aim of recovering what was lost. Thirdly, it focuses on the return of a remnant of God's people, who embody the intended testimony of His people in the world. Additionally, the speaker emphasizes the importance of being a people called out by God and the powerful influence they can have among the nations when in right relationship with Him. The sermon encourages listeners to have a mind to work and to devote themselves to God's purpose, as seen in the book of Nehemiah.

Transcript

Perhaps that note is especially required when I tell you that the Lord has led me back at this time to the book of Nehemiah. At the moment there is no particular part of the book that I am going to underline, but it is the message that this whole book has for us, as I believe a message very much needed and very suited to the time in which we live. Those of you who are familiar with the book and with the details related to it will be patient if I just say a little now at the outset as to the setting of this book for the sake of refreshing all minds and helping those who may not be so familiar with it.

You may or you may not know that although there are many books bound together in the Old Testament following this book, this is the last recorded piece of history in the life of Israel. That does not mean that it is the last part of Israel's life, but as a matter of Jewish history, this is the last record. There were prophecies after this to which we may refer as we go on, but again, this book of Nehemiah stands as the final piece of historical record in the Old Testament.

In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are one book. Later, they were divided into what the Hebrews called the two books of Ezra. And then very much later, some centuries, they were divided as we

have them now under the two names, Ezra and Nehemiah.

Then this book has its setting, as all may know, in that return from captivity of a remnant of Israel in fulfillment of the prophecy of Jerebiah that after seventy years a remnant would return. And this book has to do with that returned remnant. Under the inspired and inspiring ministry of Zerubbabel and Haggai, whose prophecies you must read, of course, in connection with this book, the temple was rebuilt.

A beginning was made, then a period of some twenty-one years of arrest, delay, suspension, and then a resumption of the work. Then another period of delay and arrest for sixty years, bringing us to the time of the reformation under Ezra. On again, and another interval of thirteen years, bringing us to the time of Nehemiah and Ezra in cooperation for the completion of the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

And as this book particularly has to do with the rebuilding of the wall. But it was both Nehemiah and Ezra that cooperated even in this final aspect of recovery. But that was not the end of the periods of arrest.

There's somewhere a twelve years of which we have no recorded details. And the final reforms of Nehemiah recorded at the end of this book, after the wall was completed, the settling in the cities of the land. And other things.

That is, briefly, very briefly, and very imperfectly, the setting of the book. But if I said no more, there's enough in that to let us see that the book has a message. Something that bears upon the centuries, the Christian centuries, and even upon the one in which we are now living.

I think that will become more apparent as we proceed. This book does end in itself. But it ends with nothing brought to perfection and completion.

Very much like the book of the Acts. Just when you're wanting to know the next thing, how it worked out, it finishes. It leaves you there for a long time.

That I think also is significant. The book of the Acts was not completed, the story was not finished, because it has taken two thousand years to add to it, to bring it nearer to completion. And this book was not completed, because nothing in the old dispensation could be completed until Christ came, who is the completion of everything.

You have to remember that it was between fifty and a hundred years after Nehemiah's work and ministry that the prophet Malachi prophesied. In which period things, as you know from his prophecies, had very seriously deteriorated. And that last book of the Bible is a very painful, pathetic, and tragic book of the Old Testament, I mean, prophecies of Malachi.

Showing again how prone God's people are to lose, to deteriorate, to depart from that which the Lord has so wonderfully sought to recover and establish. Now, this book of Nehemiah has three broad sections. First has to do with the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall.

The second section has to do with the recovery of the word of God and its establishment as the governing thing in the life of God's people. And the third part has to do with the localities, the settling of the people in the cities of the land. If we could recognize the spiritual significance of those three things, we certainly are not living back in the Old Testament when we read this book.

We are not reading past history. We are right in the presence of the immediate activity of God. The rebuilding of that which is symbolized by the wall, the re-establishment of the authority of the word of God in the life of His people.

And the whole matter of His purpose in representation in local companies. There is a lot here that is very enlightening and instructive in those matters as they are so up to date. But let us again make a survey.

I've said that the book has three main sections. But then again, there are five other things to be noted about this book as it embraces the history of God's people. Firstly, a people called out of the nations to be a people for His name.

One has only to use that phrase and we are in the New Testament immediately. And recognize the purpose of God in this, to take out of the nations a people for His name. This book embraces the history of such a people.

Secondly, it embraces that history of their powerful influence among the nations. The great spiritual influence that this people had among the nations when they were in right relationship with God. There is no mistaking that.

When we get to begin in the book of Joshua, see how as constituted God's people in the land, immediately all the nations around about began to take account of them. Realize that they were a people to be reckoned with and a people of whom they had great fear. They had such an influence.

And so it was, from time to time, when their relationship with God was right, they were a people who could not be ignored among the nations. That is something to take a note of. Because the loss of that influence is something that has to be looked at for the discovery of its cause or causes.

I'm tempted to enlarge upon each of these, but I think that will come. But you will agree with me if I just at that very point say that it is not so now. In the case of the Lord's people in this world, they are not something of which the world is afraid.

They are not something that is being taken account of as representing a menace to the kingdom of God. The spiritual influence of the people of God in the world and in the nations is not something that is a tremendous challenge no one can ignore. As it was from time to time with Israel and as it was in the beginning of the Christian era.

It was like that. What a spiritual influence. What a telling thought.

What an upset to the world. Indeed, it was true. People that turned the world upside down were there.

This book embraces the history of that tremendous spiritual influence that they had once had, which they had lost, and which now God was seeking to recover. Why, in the third place, why was the influence lost? That impact because of the lost spirituality of the people themselves. Their pure spiritual life and nature had given place as we shall see as we go on to other things, the spirit of the world.

Then in the fourth place, the book embraces that long period of captivity, of impotence, and of discipline. Deep, deep, acute, poignant discipline, all with a view to recover what was lost. And finally, for the moment, the return of a remnant, disciplined, chastened, to embody that which God ever intended to be the testimony of his people in this world.

Those are the five things making up the history covered by this book. Having said that about the book, let us still take a wider view. And here, dear friends, you will be patient, is what has come to me with tremendous force.

And I feel if it should register itself upon you, would have a very great effect. This book, which goes under this name, Nehemiah, is in itself a microcosm of the conflict of all the ages. You think about that.

When we reach the end of this book, which as we have said is the last fragment of historical record in the Old Testament, we are in the presence of an achievement intended by God himself. Something has been done, which God intended to be done. And, therefore, something to which God himself committed himself in sovereign purpose and sovereign power.

That to me is the heart of the message of this book. Let's repeat that. With the conclusion of this book, we find ourselves standing right in the presence of a tremendous achievement.

Something has been done. The doing of which demanded the absolute sovereignty of God in purpose and in power. So that this achievement represents something to which God committed himself because he willed it.

Because he determined to have it. That is a comprehensive statement as to the whole conflict of the ages. At last, long last, it may be, at last, in the final end of all ends, we shall stand in something like that.

We shall stand in an achievement which God intended from eternity, to which he committed himself, and which will be the monument to his sovereign power and his sovereign will. The reason for this, this being a microcosm of this conflict of the ages, a representation of the much larger purpose and want of God through all time. The reason why here we have such a wonderful, clear-cut movement from God's side, on his own part, by his own initiative, in his own sovereignty, committing himself to it.

And who can read this book without seeing that whatever occupies the forefront of the stage is God behind this. It's God who is in this. The reason why in what is after all only a historic incident, a small fragment of divine history and representation, the reason why this sovereign activity of God, this committal of God to this thing, is here on record, is not because it is something in itself, not because this began and ended with this remnant, but because this movement and this remnant embodied or contained the principles and the attributes of that much larger, that much greater, that eternal purpose of God.

See, the Bible is like that, dear friends. Again and again you see God interested in something or someone, very interested, and acting sovereignly in relation to that thing or person, committing himself and letting it be known that he is bound up with that or with them. Is it because God is so interested in the incidents of history, in persons or things or places on this earth? No, it's not that at all.

If you look deeper, you will see that those persons or those things or those places are the embodiment of spiritual and eternal principles. They are not just things in themselves beginning and ending with themselves. There is something there which represents what is of God which is eternal in his methods, in his laws, his principles.

So that this book of Nehemiah, being a book which shows so clearly and has all the evidences of God being involved, God committing himself and God acting in sovereignty, so wonderfully. May I say as parenthesis that the very movement of the infinite sovereignty of God's wisdom and power is not always in some demonstration, rending the heavens, it's in just ruling and overruling and making things happen and

work together. It all looks very simple.

Nevertheless, it would never have been but for God. It could never have been. The forces against it were far too great for the achievement but for God.

Prime actor is God. He is behind it all. Well, not because this is something in itself but because of this very thing, that this thing embodies principles dear to God's heart which are infinitely greater than the thing or the person.

And those are the things which recur again and again in the movement of God through the ages. He acts sovereignly. He chooses.

He commits himself. He works not because of the people of the moment or even the method but because there is something very, very dear to his heart here in spiritual principles and in eternal love. I trust that you are able to interpret from what I am saying very much larger things.

Let us see what constitutes that achievement. And it will not be difficult for us to make the transition from one realm of things to another. You have these two realms, these two categories, these two orders.

On the one side you have the temporal. Over against that you have the spiritual. On the one side you have the earthly.

Over against that you have the heavenly. On the one side you have the historical. Over against that you have the eternal.

On the one side you have something that is quite local. On the other side, over against that, you have that which is universal. And again, on the one side you have a limited representation.

On the other side you have the divine fullness of reality. I say if you look at the things which constitute this achievement recorded in this book, it will not be difficult for you to make that transition from the temporal, earthly, historical, local, limited, to the spiritual, heavenly, eternal, universal, and real. Then what constitutes it? Let's break it up in this way.

First of all, a place chosen by God and appointed by Him for His dwelling. Here, Jerusalem was the local, earthly, temporal, limited representation of that far greater divine conception. A place for God's dwelling.

A place where He chose to have His habitation. That is, a far, far greater interpretation than any earthly person. You see, that goes right back behind everything.

Why God created this world. What His thought was. To dwell amongst men.

To make the earth His habitation. To fill the earth with His glory. And with His character.

A place chosen and appointed by God for His dwelling. The first characteristic of this story. And of the achievement.

But, ruined. Ruined. It's a far bigger history than the history of Jerusalem in that word, in relation to God's desire and prophecy.

Ruined. Making it necessary for God to withdraw. Unable to realize, for the time being, that eternal intention to dwell with men.

Ruined. But, for recovered and for rebuilt, what a significance the book has if that were all. If that is what it's about.

If that is its significance and import. If that, then, is its larger meaning than the merely earthly and temporal. Then we understand God acting in sovereignty.

Power and wisdom. And committing Himself. You see the point? I think that's quite clear.

A place for God. Suitable to Himself. Where He may dwell with men.

What a lot there is of the Bible in that. When God went into a pagan city to begin this movement of recovery. He found the man who appeared unto Him as the God of glory.

Pulled him out of that city and put into his heart another city. And that man, Abraham, looked for a city whose builder and architect was God. He never realized it.

He died looking for it. On through the Old Testament, it's the city, city always in view. The heart of everything.

The most significant thing. That city. And yet, as an earthly being, so disappointing.

Failing God. But the vision does not fade. And it's impressive that at the end of the Bible, the last chapters of the Bible, the city is secure.

He carried me away into great and high mountains. Showed me the holy city, New Jerusalem. Coming down from God out of heaven.

Prepares a bride adorned for a husband. Having the glory of God. A light, light unto a lamp.

Most precious, a stone most precious. You've got the larger, the heavenly, the eternal, the spiritual interpretation of this word. Just in the word, city.

This wall is the next thing. The boundary wall of the city. Indicating a sphere to which God limits himself.

In principle. That is, God will not commit himself to anything and everything. God is particular.

God is particular. He will have things according to his own thought. The city is built and designed by God.

Something that answers to, corresponds to a divine thought. And the wall indicates that demarcation of what is of God. That limiting of things to a specific kind of thought.

Spiritual thought. It's a boundary of God. It's only a figure and type in Nehemiah or in the Old Testament.

But it carries that spiritual principle. Here you will find that which is essentially, intrinsically according to the mind of God. It's marked off.

Here you will find that which is essentially, intrinsically according to the mind of God. It's marked off by that thought. That wall, ah yes, shattered.

Shattered. It was like that to begin with in the garden. God present.

Because everything corresponded to the mind of God. And he was able to say, it is very good. It is very good.

But, broken down like the wall of Jerusalem. But God again moving to recover. To restore.

To rebuild. That's what this book is about. More than a bit, a fragment of history in the Old Testament.

A representation of a great spiritual conception. Out from the mind. Thirdly, a people because of loss of divine character.

Scattered and alienated, that is here. We know from the prophet, the condition of the people which led to their alienation. They are being carried away into a foreign country.

And they are being scattered from the land. Loss of spiritual character. Divine nature.

People away from God. And God's essential thought. But, a people in representation in the remnant.

Restored to their home in God. Friends, everyone whom the Spirit of God recovers spiritually. Brings back to the Lord.

Knows quite well that they've come home. All the sacred, holy meaning of that word. Home.

At rest. People restored to their spiritual home. But, a remnant saved.

Cleansed and united under divinely appointed headship. Again, I say what a lot there is in that. People saved.

Gathered out of the nation. Cleansed from their old sin. Brought back into the place of fellowship with God.

And united as a people under a divinely appointed headship. Well, you can carry that further. And you know that that is what the New Testament is about.

It's all about that. This book then embodies the eternal past and the eternal future. And as I started by saying it is a microcosm of this long drawn out battle of the ages.

Something holy. But there's one more thing. A people whose testimony and whose position, whose position represents the absolute impotence of all their enemies.

That's no small thing. When the church reaches the end for which God is determined and has committed himself, the church will embody this testimony. All the efforts of the ages on the path of adverse powers have been prodimped.

Could not defeat God's end. Look at this book. You see the enemies.

We refer to them again later. The enemies. Many.

Of many kinds. All set upon the determined frustration and defeat of this object. We reach the end of the book in an achievement which says, no weapon that was formed against them has prospered.

Every tongue that rose in judgment against them they condemned. They are the embodiment that when God determines unto inner people that people may be assailed from every angle and along every line. But in the end they are a testimony of the enemy.

He cannot accomplish his end. How rich this book is. As, as I have said, a representation of the far greater than the history which it records.

Behind this recovery there is a long, painful history. A long and painful history. That which made it necessary.

That is, made the recovery necessary. Firstly, there's the history of a people's failure in faith and confidence in God. Proved and exhibited by their turning to the devices of men.

You look into Israel's history, that's just the book. Again and again, when they lost faith and confidence in God, allowed that faith and confidence to wane, to weaken, or to depart. They turned once to the devices of men.

They went down to Egypt. They resorted to this and that and some other worldly means for their very survival. Tremendous amount of history in Old and New Testament in that fact.

That is why recovery became necessary. A recovery of faith and confidence in God that is altogether independent of this world and of men. That has its glowing testimony simply because God was its only result.

Have I said that we in our day are living in this book spiritually? There's no doubt about that. We do not want to embark upon criticism, censoriousness and that kind of thing. But to anyone who has any perception, it is clear that this is the tragedy of the Church through its centuries and today.

That there are alternatives to God. Alternatives to God that would not be admitted, acknowledged or put like that. But Church is looking to the world, to men, to devices, to all sorts of things for its survival because it has lost that essential relationship with God of faith and confidence.

We look at the beginning of the New Testament. Look at that book of beginnings of this dispensation, what is called the Acts. And were men in any way calling upon the world, looking to the world, dependent upon the world, looking to themselves, to the devices of men, the institutions of men, the organizations of men? Were they? That was the day of their mighty influence in the world.

But the glorified Christ was their one and their only recourse at all times, in all matters. And that accounted for their power. Loss of confidence in God is always proved by what you turn to, your second course, failure in faith and confidence.

Leaning to men, resulting in dislocation, disruption, division, schism of every kind. That was Israel's history. A disrupted, disintegrated people, broken into a thousand fragments.

No cohesion, no unity, no oneness, therefore no single testimony or impact or registration upon their surroundings. That always follows this loss of a faith position with God. It did with them.

The nature of it, the nature of their condition when it came to be like that, well, always defilement and corruption. That is, a breaking down of the barriers between what is of God and what is of the world. The world seeping in, the world touching holy things with its defiled hand.

And, sadly, people of God reached out a hand to the hand of the world, defiling their own hand, defilement and corruption. And the general result, a false position, even a false life, which is always evidenced, always evidenced by frustration, disappointment, what the Bible calls vanity. That is, labor, expenditure,

tremendous activities, never getting there.

Never getting there. After all, the money put into bags with holes. Isn't that, Haggai, the bringing home of the fruit of the labor and finding? Whereas it seemed to be something, it turns out to be nothing.

Frustration, vanity, not getting through to anything. Life spent, life poured out, tremendous efforts. And then, what have you got? What is it? Malachi and Haggai give us the answer.

You look at it and say, it's nothing. It's not commensurate with all our efforts. So it was with Israel, like that.

That's a pathetic position. Disappointment in life and life's work, and a hollowness of heart. It's not worth it.

And God's showing in this book how to reverse that. And this book is a wonderful setting point of the reverse of that. Now the people have a mind to work.

Now the people are giving themselves tremendously up to what purpose? I have said you reach the end of this book and you're in the presence of an achievement. Not a frustration. Not a discipline.

An achievement. An end is reached. An answer is given, a positive note upon which you end.

So far as this representation of things is concerned, I like the way in which it is put. So the war was finished. So the war was finished.

I repeat, the book is a revelation to our hearts of how defeat, frustration, disappointment, vanity and vexation of spirit can be turned into a mighty achievement with the joy of the Lord as your strength. You know that's the great word. Joy of the Lord is your strength.

If I understand the meaning of that, it just means God's satisfaction is your satisfaction. If God is satisfied, every heart in fellowship with God will be satisfied. Well all this demanded a new activity of God and the securing of a people in which that new activity could be shown for.

Could be wrought out. That's what is here. God moving to have a people for recovery.

For recovery. Does that belong only to the book of Nehemiah? Dear friends, I believe still that God will commit himself. God will act sovereignly when he finds a people disciplined, chastened, maybe broken, so far as all self-interest and self-strength are concerned.

People who, like the remnant of exile and all that it represented and whose heart, of course, was bent toward the praise of the Lord. When the Lord finds a people who have no other counter or dividing interest but he should have that which satisfies his own heart, he'll commit himself, they'll have their difficulties, their many adversities, their plenty of suffering. They will embody the faith.

But no enemy is sufficient. And no man can defeat God, to frustrate God, to keep God at his end. Maybe that you and I are called to be a little part of such a movement of God in our day.

Does your heart respond to that? Remember, as I have said, this book represents an end time and an end time activity of God. We are in that time even more than Nehemiah was. The end time of all end time.

And this is what God would do. I pray that he may open your spiritual eyes. Perhaps the setting of this time together.

And again, either give or restore that vision which integrates his people and makes us, like these people, devoted and united for God.

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