

The Character of the Lord's Vessel of Recovery

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Lord requires a vessel of recovery, a man with a heart-burden and a passion for His spiritual interests, to recover His full testimony concerning His Son.

Scripture: Isaiah 58:6

Topics: "Spiritual Responsibility", "Recovery of God's Testimony"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the character of Nehemiah as a vessel of recovery, illustrating how he embodies the qualities necessary for restoring God's testimony. Nehemiah's heart-burden for the state of Jerusalem reflects a deep spiritual concern that goes beyond mere interest; it is a passionate commitment to God's purposes. Sparks contrasts Nehemiah's active, energetic approach with Ezra's more passive demeanor, highlighting the need for decisive action in the face of spiritual decline. The sermon calls for believers to take personal responsibility for the state of the Church and to engage in fervent prayer and action, rather than simply lamenting the situation. Ultimately, the message challenges the congregation to embody Nehemiah's spirit of recovery in their own lives and ministries.

Transcript

Reading: Isaiah 58:6-14.

We come now to the second thing, the vessel of recovery; for it is the recovery of the full and complete testimony according to God's mind which is represented by the work of Nehemiah, especially the recovery of the testimony of God toward the world and men.

Typical Significance of Nehemiah and Ezra

Let us repeat this general word, that what we have in Ezra and Nehemiah is the testimony of God concerning His Son Jesus Christ, and that, in a threefold way. The testimony concerning the Cross, in the altar; the testimony concerning the Church, in the house; and the testimony to the world, to the nations; to men, as in the wall. So that it is Christ at the centre and Christ at the circumference. It is the fullness of Christ from centre to circumference that is here; and as to the wall particularly. It represents the defining as to what is of Christ, and what is not of Christ; as to what is according to God's Son, and what is not according to God's Son; for the wall is the boundary, the line of demarcation as to what is inside of the

testimony of Jesus, and as to what is outside of that testimony. Those are general remarks to help you grasp the whole import of this book.

Nehemiah - the Man

Having said that, we come to this second factor of the vessel of recovery - the man, Nehemiah. You will, of course, be remembering that Nehemiah is a representation. What he was in his day is what God seeks to be possessed of at the end of this age; not, perhaps, in one outstanding individual, although there will be an individual ministry in this respect, but more especially in a corporate instrument, a company, by which the Lord will recover this full testimony concerning His Son. So that what is said of Nehemiah has its application to such an instrument at any time when that instrument is brought into being by the Lord for His purpose.

It is helpful and useful to recognize the difference that there was between the two men who represented this movement of God, Ezra and Nehemiah; and there was a difference. I think we might describe the difference somewhat in this way: Ezra was more of the character of a priest, while Nehemiah partook more of the features of a prophet. If you let your mind dwell upon the Word in those two connections you will understand what I mean. Ezra was a quieter man than Nehemiah, perhaps a more restful man than Nehemiah; you might say that he was a gentler man than Nehemiah.

Spiritual Energy

Nehemiah was rougher; he was a man marked by action - prompt and energetic action. Ezra seems to have been more marked by thought - not that he was not a man of action; but if there was a difference in these two men, Nehemiah was a man of action rather than of thought, more than was Ezra.

Now Nehemiah, toward the Lord's people, was kind and considerate; hospitable and encouraging; and always sought to be helpful; but towards Divine interests, and spiritual principles, and enemies of those interests and principles, he was uncompromising; zealous and jealous; strict and prompt; there was no getting round him. We mention this because it marks a Divine aspect of things. The different types are required for different aspects of the Divine purpose; certain features belong to certain points of progress in what God is doing.

For Ezra to be a builder of the House and an adorer, an embellisher of the House, demands a quietness. So in him we see a passiveness, if you like, a love which buildeth up. But when it comes to the question of foreign, alien, mixed, and inimical elements having impinged upon the things of God, and having brought the testimony of God into ruin and disrepute; and when it is a matter of meeting the forces which are set dead against the Name and the honour of the Lord, then you have moved from the first chapter of Ephesians into the last chapter; you have gone from the love which buildeth up, to the warring in the heavenlies, and you have different features developed. Thus a Nehemiah character comes in for such a phase.

You see that in the taking up of the Lord's interests in a day when the forces of evil are dead-set against those interests and that testimony, the Lord has to develop warring elements and characteristics in His instrument, and so a Nehemiah is not such a mild man as an Ezra. Now that lies on the surface, that is perfectly patent, but it does bring to us again an emphasis upon what the Lord needs right at the end, when we are peculiarly up against the forces foreign to the Lord's interest; which are seeking to undermine, under-cut and work the destruction of His testimony; which have already obtained a hold, as

we have seen in those nine things which we mentioned. So that is Nehemiah. Vigour, downrightness is required in a day like this.

There is a mildness, which passes by the name of love, which may do a very great deal of harm to the testimony. It allows many things to abide in secret, under cover; things which are working positively against the Lord's testimony, and smothers them over with what we call love and forbearance, when a Nehemiah is needed to chase them away. Regarding one who transgressed he says: "... I chased him from me". He did more than that, as some of you recall. Ezra and Nehemiah need not of necessity represent different times, but only different phases of responsibility in relation to the Lord's interests.

A Heart-burden

As we look more deeply into Nehemiah's heart, we find that he was a man who had a great heart-burden. He carried on his heart very heavily the interests of the Lord and His testimony. His brother, Hanani, had come to him in his far-off exile, and reported the state of things at Jerusalem. That is how the book opens, and Nehemiah himself tells us how that report affected him. "And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days; and I fasted and prayed before the God of heaven, and said..." There is a great heart-burden. That heart-burden is first of all borne in the presence of God alone.

Then out from the presence of God he carries that burden, and it becomes apparent that this man has a concern. In spite of himself, in spite of what was expected of him, in spite of what was unlawful before men, his heart-burden betrays itself. "Now I was cupbearer to the king. And it came to pass... that I took up the wine, and gave it unto the king. Now I had not been beforetime sad in his presence. And the king said unto me, 'Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart.' Then I was very sore afraid, and I said unto the king, 'Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?'" (Neh. 1:11, 2:1-3; A.S.V.). That is enough to show us this further thing as to the nature and the condition of a vessel to be used by the Lord in recovering His full testimony, the testimony concerning His Son. That vessel, that instrument is one, and must be one, upon whose heart a condition of things so clearly contrary to the thought of God genuinely lies with very great pressure. We have shown of what order this burden of Nehemiah's was.

It is one thing, beloved, for us to get a kind of public concern about things and then begin to make a great noise about it amongst men; to advertise, to demonstrate, and to give it a public form in utterance and effort and organization; to join ourselves to some cause, or to join some cause to ourselves, and then in that cause to make a great big affair of it: that is one thing. And that may have all manner of elements which just fall short of that which is essential and necessary from the Lord's standpoint. It is one thing to come to a situation from the outside, and link ourselves on with it, and take it up, and make it our work for life, our life-interest; it is quite another thing for the Lord to put into our hearts, in secret, an almost unbearable, intolerable burden which is His own heart-burden, and for us first of all to bear that thing secretly in the presence of God upon our hearts in a deep out-pouring of travailing prayer; quite another thing to come to the Lord's interests in that way.

There are plenty of people whom you could get interested in a cause; whom you could get to take up a piece of work requiring help, but it is another thing to have that spiritual fellowship with God which results in God putting His travail into your own soul. The difference is that in the one instance the thing is

something objective; we come along and interest ourselves in it, take it up; but it is apart from us. It has our interest, it has our energy, it has our resources, but it is something objective to ourselves. It is a piece of work, a movement, a testimony - using that word in a technical sense.

The other thing is this: before the Lord we take responsibility. Do you notice that "we" in chapter 1, verse 6? Nehemiah is a part of this and this is a part of him. You notice how, all the way through, in dealing with this matter he uses the word "we". He is apart from the whole thing, that is, he has not accepted the conditions; he is not responsible for the state of things; he certainly repudiates the whole thing, and does not for one moment agree with it, and yet he is in this thing as though he were responsible for it; as though God could lay it all at his own door. The thing has come so near to his own heart that he does not stand here and the situation there, but he finds himself as one with it. It is his own burden, and he takes the thing in responsibility upon his own shoulders before God in prayer, and prays vicarious prayer over this situation. That is being on the inside. If the man himself had been personally responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem, the wreckage of the walls, and the awful moral condition of the people of God there; if he had been one who had brought it all about, he could not have taken this thing more to heart. He is like a man who is convicted of being responsible for it all.

Not a Profession but a Passion

We shall have more to say about that later, but that is enough for the moment to see what kind of vessel the Lord must have to do things. He does not want "workers" to take up His work; He wants travailleurs to travail with Him for His spiritual interests. He does not want employees, He wants sons. He does not want experts, He wants those who have a passion; those to whose heart the whole thing comes so clearly that it bends them down before Him in an anguish; who are so much in the matter that it is their matter before God; it is theirs. It is no mere mental apprehension of teaching and of truth; it is a heart-burden, a desperate concern for the Lord, because of things as they are spiritually amongst His people.

Are we exercised like that? Are we moved like that? Are we in things like that? Have we taken up work for the Lord, associated ourselves with some cause; or have we come with God's own burden and travail in our souls - this thing to us is a thing which saps our life; for which we are pouring out our very blood, the thing which costs everything, and yet we can do no other; there is no question of resigning, giving up, the thing is ourselves? God must have something like that at the end for His purpose, and I think if we said no more, that is a challenging word to our hearts.

Oh, let us wipe the slate of all these other ideas of organizing something, running something, getting a movement going. Let us see that God brings this into being out of travail. He baptizes a soul into an anguish; He throws upon some one man, or some little company, the mantle of His own terrible disappointment, dissatisfaction and grief because of things as He sees them spiritually amongst His own people.

That is how God brings things into being. Men do it in other ways, but that has always been God's way. It has cost the instrument its life every time. That does not necessarily mean that the instrument has died a sudden death, or even laid down its life in martyrdom; but it has cost the instrument its life. Are we in things like that?

Such is Nehemiah. We are seeing into the inner secret history of this thing; it is before God, not before men. Oh, may the Lord save us from having the preponderance before men, and the lesser measure before Himself. May all that is before men come out of what we are before God. That should be a matter of

exercise for us; for you, for me; and we should ask the Lord that our secret life with Him over these matters shall be kept well abreast of all our public ministries and our outward activities. If the balance is on the side of what is public, and toward men, there will be weakness and failure. Strength and effectiveness will be according to the measure of our secret history with God. Then out from the secret place Nehemiah carried his heart-burden before men; but not initially that men might take account of it. He would fain, I think, have covered it up, for there is fear here when he realizes that it has been detected, has betrayed itself; perhaps unconsciously - certainly unwontedly.

And yet the manifestation of the burden has a right place when it comes that way; when, outwardly, others are able to take account of us and say: 'There is nothing put on in this matter; this is no mere professional thing; this is not some habit, something they are interested in; this is something which to them is a matter of life and death; this is a matter which goes right to the heart with them'. And men are able to discern whether it is like that or not. Oh, people know, better than perhaps we think they do, whether we are real or whether things are put on; whether we are speaking out of a book, or whether we are speaking out of our hearts; whether the thing is something we have collected, or whether it is something born of anguish.

I am speaking to brethren and sisters now to whom ministry is committed in a more public way. May I urge this upon you, that you ever seek to have your own heart deeply exercised in everything that you have to say publicly. Yes, it will cost; it will mean anguish, it will mean sorrow of heart, it will mean a price; but, beloved, it is the way of spiritual fruitfulness and effectiveness; only thus can the Lord make you His messenger, in His message, that is, a sign unto the people of the thing that you are saying. Thus are men able to say: 'Yes, that is not something they have read or studied or prepared; that is something that has had a working in the life, and it has cost something'. It will cost, but it is the way of effectiveness and fruitful service.

And what is true as to public ministry will be true in relation to any instrument that the Lord will use for any special purpose; the thing must be wrought into it, and not be something that it has adopted. The Lord keep us from adopting things, but work the thing right into us. Well, that is Nehemiah; a man with a burden, and a man with a concern; one whose heart is deeply wrought upon by God to the end he might share His own Divine travail.

Divine Facilitations

Now a word as to the procedure of the man. First there is the man himself; then his concern for the testimony; and now his procedure in recovery. There was some history before he came out to take up his work definitely, and it is well just to note it because it has a place; a preparatory history we may call it. There were those signs of favour from the Lord which were basic to what followed. The king had discerned his inward state; had diagnosed his trouble as sorrow of heart; had put to him a question as to what he would have; and you notice what follows: "Then the king said unto me, 'For what dost thou make request?' So I prayed to the God of heaven" - instant, prompt, brief touch with heaven - "And I said unto the king..." I believe, beloved, that in those touches of response from heaven, which represent Divine favour; those helpful little things, we might call them, in this whole matter; where God just gives indications that this is His way, that He is in this - favourable signs - I believe in these things there is represented what very often obtains when the Lord is going to do something new in relation to His testimony.

The Lord prefaces what He will do by, shall we say, certain indications of favour. Presently we shall be up against the grim realities; presently faith will be well tested; the difficulties increasing, accumulating; but

there have been those little favourable indications from the Lord that He was with us; that this was His way. They may not continue, but there is just that little space where the Lord seems to bear witness in various little helpful ways. He constitutes something which, in days of difficulty and darkness and adversity, we always remember as the Lord's way of showing us that this was our life-work, this was the way of His will for us. I think some of you know what I am talking about, and we can look back to a time when at the commencement of some new piece of life experience, service; some new movement of God in us and through us, there were marks, clear marks of Divine favour, and things just moved beautifully and wonderfully; it was all very romantic, all very wonderful; we were filled with wonder at the way the Lord was doing things, facilitating and helping. That was a phase: that passed, and the grim realities followed; but we do not forget that time. Thus it was with Nehemiah. For this short period everything seemed to be on his side, with him; there were these favourable touches of the Lord.

Well, that is very good, and that is a preparatory period which should be cherished; but if that passes do not think that things have gone wrong. The Lord was just getting you on the way; but He is not going to keep you on the way by sight, He is going to cause you to walk in the way by faith. It is like that. Remarkable things happen at the beginning, and those remarkable things do not always continue. One says that because it is so true to life and experience, and it is a thing not to be overlooked here as we take a survey of this movement of God. Very often the heart looks back upon those periods, and craves to have them all over again and says: "Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord"; it craves to have the early seals of God repeated again and again; but no, you advance beyond that.

Now the Lord's facilitation is to get you on the way, not to get you into a trap and leave you. You have that life in the background, and you know it was all the Lord, the Lord did it. We are not in this way by our own urge, effort, endeavour, scheming, planning; the Lord brought us in, and favoured us with marked indications that it was His way. At that time the signs of this way being the Lord's way were unmistakable; there is no doubt about it, the Lord marvellously put our feet on this road and, although there came a point where we ceased to have those conspicuous signs of Divine acts and undertakings, yet there was no doubt about it that our coming into this way was of the Lord.

Nehemiah met grim things later, but doubtless he always remembered the wonderful way in which the Lord facilitated the initiation of that into which he was Divinely brought. It may be the Lord will continue to give you much in the way of such tokens, but it will be the exception and not the rule if He does; do not expect that you are going to find your path strewn with flowers all the way. Very likely you will find an end of the roses, and the beginning of the thorns; but the Lord has indicated that it was right, it was His way, by helping at the beginning, and now you have to go on in faith. That was a preparatory stage with Nehemiah.

Two Sides of Prayer-life

Now I want to draw your attention to Nehemiah's prayer-life. How basic this prayer life was to everything. You should read through the book again just to take account of this matter. You will find that Nehemiah's prayer-life was a very real thing, and a very persistent thing; you might almost say a continuous thing, but it was not always of the same kind.

In this first chapter you have the deep, secret outpouring of his heart to God. He is away with the Lord alone, and in a strong heart-emptying prayer, he pours himself out. He can do that, remember. That is a phase of his prayer-life; he can do it and he does. But as you read on you find that it is not always like that.

His prayer is frequently what we may call ejaculatory: "So I prayed to the God of heaven". It is like an ejaculation, a sudden lifting up of the heart. There is no time for the outpouring of the heart. Here is a situation, an emergency, a difficult situation, something arising which allows of no getting away to God and pouring out the heart, but only permits of a lifting of it to the Lord on the spot in a moment, a touch with heaven; but he is in touch with heaven. Those two forms of prayer must go together.

We hear many people say, 'Yes, well I can pray anywhere; I can pray in a bus or a tram, or walking along the street'. Very often those people say that to excuse themselves from secret outpouring of heart before the Lord. Beware of that! I do not believe that we shall get heaven's sudden responses to sudden ejaculatory prayers unless we have a background of prayer. I do not believe that we can have an emergency touch with heaven if we have not a deep background-life with heaven.

Nehemiah's prayer-life brings these two things together; that because he had that prayer-life in secret with God where, as he could, he did pour himself out to God, then in the time of emergency he was already in touch with heaven, and heaven responded. It is important to see that. But when we have said that we must note the general fact, that an instrument, a vessel, or a work like Nehemiah's in an end-time in relation to the Coming of the Lord, is essentially a vessel and instrument with a strong prayer-life in secret with God, and for the bringing in of heaven in emergencies it is essential that there be a background of prayer ministry.

It seems to me that Nehemiah did nothing without prayer. It seems that in every turn of the way he lifted his heart to the Lord; in every situation, question, difficulty, he was in touch with the Lord about it. He was a man who made prayer his ground of action, on every point, in every direction.

Now whether this interests you or not is not the question. The question is, are we going to be an instrument for the Lord for His deepest heart purpose? If so, there must be a life of prayer. There has to be the place with the Lord apart and alone in heart outpouring, and there has to be, from that, a constant touch with the Lord as we move in His interests from point to point. The prayer life of Nehemiah is something to study.

Taking Action

Then there is the matter of taking action; the action which Nehemiah took. He did take action, and that is something to take account of. There are many people who have burdens and concerns, but who never do any more than bemoan the situation as it is; who never get beyond deploring things. They are everlastingly talking about the bad conditions. Their whole conversation is concerning how wrong things are, and so they go about bemoaning the state of affairs; talking and never doing any thing.

Nehemiah was not like that. Nehemiah was very keenly alive to the situation and took it very much to heart, but he did not simply bemoan it, and he did not merely preach about it. We must not fall into a way of criticizing the Lord's people who are not where we think they ought to be; who do not know what we think they ought to know; who have not arrived at the place at which we have arrived, and therefore we consider them as being down there, and we talk about them thus: 'They have not the light, you know'. 'They have not entered into the truth, you know'.

Yes, we might even go beyond that, and denounce them for their backwardness; denounce them because they have not the light. It is easy to get into a way of condemning, to develop a spirit of condemnation, of judging. All that does not cost anything. The real question is: 'What are we doing about it?' Nehemiah with

all his perception and discernment of things, and all his heartache, did not go to the people and say: 'Look here, you are all wrong, you are all out of the way, you are in a bad state'; he went to them and said: 'We are in a bad state; we are in a bad way'. He got down by the side of them as though he were where they were, and he was going to help them up to where he saw they ought to be, and to the place where he himself in spirit, already, was.

Now this is a matter we must recognize. You see here one of those laws of what is called the Church, the Body, and the physical body is taken in the Word as an illustration of the Church, which is Christ's Body. Now, suppose a hand and an arm have gone wrong, perhaps out of joint and the whole of one side is affected, and things are not working right; there is disorder, perhaps disease; maybe a very painful malady in those limbs, in that part of the body. Now if the other hand and arm should get up and say: 'You are all wrong over there, you ought not to be like that; we do not belong to you at all, we have no association with you, no connection', is that true? "The body is one". You cannot separate two or three of your limbs from your body, and put them in one place and the rest in another and still have a complete body.

No, the very fact of the organism means that you are one body, and if one member suffers all the members suffer with it. Being an organism, and not an organization, every member - although its condition may not be as bad as some other members - is involved by its very life in the state of the other. The body has one life, it has one nerve system, it is a corporate whole. That principle is here - "We" - and the law of the Body is this, that if there are those who are out of the way, who have not light, truth, life, as we think they ought to have, being a body, beloved, we cannot live in detachment from them. We are by the very fact of being an organism spiritually bound to them, a part of them; and the Lord is not going to cleave this Body down the centre and cut off that half which is more backward than the other.

Oh, no! That is not the Lord's way. The Lord does not divide the Body, the Body is a whole; and you will notice all the way through the Lord's Word, that the Lord brings some members into real concern for the others, in order to bring the others to a place where He would have them. And Nehemiah, although spiritually far above these people in his state, far beyond them, comes down there and says: "we".

Now do believe me, I feel so strongly that what the Lord wants is that there shall never be the sign of that division which is the fruit and outworking of any kind of superiority of light and knowledge and truth, that puts others who have not that light and truth in an inferior place; relegates them to another quarter, and regards them as something apart from the Lord's people. That must not be, and our attitude, the attitude of any who may have been given more light for ministry purposes - not only for themselves - to the whole Body, the attitude of such to others must be that of being in the place where they are, to help them on, and not to judge, to criticize, to condemn.

Oh, no, the Lord will not reward us because we have more light, but according to what we have done with the light He gave us. There will be many of the Lord's children in glory who had not half the light that you and I have, and they will be sharing His glory as much as you and I will, but on the basis of what they did with the light they had. Responsibility is according to light. Our responsibility will be all the greater if we have more light. Our attitude toward all whom we may feel - and have good reason to feel - are far short of what the Lord would have them be, must be one of earnest, humble, yearning over them and getting down helpfully alongside of them, not detaching ourselves and living apart, and regarding them as those who have not the light.

We must go out as Nehemiah did and say: 'We are involved in this'. If there is a bad state, we are involved in it; apart from the light that we have we are involved in it. Our responsibility for the light involves us, and we must take responsibility for the state of things, and work with God against it, in love, in fellowship. Thus did Nehemiah.

Oh, may the Lord speak to our hearts very directly through this word, and make us to see that there is something that He needs, something that must be if He is to be fully satisfied; that things with His people are not as He would have them; that the full testimony of His Son is not represented as He would have it represented. In order that it might be so He must have an instrument, a vessel; and these are the things which must characterize such a vessel: energy against all compromise and mixture in the things of God; a great heart-burden for the Lord's testimony; taking personal responsibility for the bad state; a deep and continuous touch with God by prayer; taking action in fellowship with God for recovery, and not merely bemoaning the state of things.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/t-austin-sparks/the-character-of-the-lords-vessel-of-recovery/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net