

66 Kindles of Matthew Henry Commentary

Buy all the 66 Kindles for \$2.99 on a secure website

THE BIG BOOK OF CHRISTIAN QUOTES Kindle Edition

Let's Celebrate Advent Every Day!: Through Practicing God's Presence! Kindle Edition

Practicing The Presence Of God — The Best Rule of Holy Life Kindle Edition

LIKE US ON FACEBOOK: <https://www.facebook.com/BrokenByHim>

Let's Celebrate Advent Every Day!: Through Practicing God's Presence! Kindle Edition

More books you might be interested in checking out

The Art of Prophesying with The Calling of the Ministry

MEMORIES OF PATMOS: A Study Of The Apocalypse & Exposition Of The Revelation Of Jesus Christ

A Lamp Unto My Feet:366 Bible Verses & Prayers - Tools for the Believer's Daily Renewal [Kindle Edition] \$1.49
<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00AUN6DC6>

Practicing The Presence Of God \$0.99

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00DJYQSDC/>

The Sinful Desires Of The Flesh! \$1.49

<http://www.amazon.com/The-Sinful-Desires-Flesh-ebook/dp/B00EEPZAN4/>

Copyright © 2014 Public Domain Work

Kindle edited by: M. J. Andre
Fearless Eagle Publishing, Toronto, Ontario

Table of Contents

No table of contents entries found.

Preface

An Exposition, With Practical Observations, of The Book of Nehemiah

This book continues the history of the *children of the captivity*, the poor Jews, that had lately returned out of Babylon to their own land. At this time not only the Persian monarchy flourished in great pomp and power, but Greece and Rome began to be very great and to make a figure. Of the affairs of those high and mighty states we have authentic accounts extant; but the sacred and inspired history takes cognizance only of the state of the Jews, and makes no mention of other nations but as the Israel of God had dealings with them: for the Lord's portion is his people; they are his peculiar treasure, and, in comparison with them, the rest of the world is but as lumber. In my esteem, Ezra the scribe and Nehemiah the tirshatha, though neither of them ever wore a crown, commanded an army, conquered any country, or was famed for philosophy or oratory, yet both of them, being pious praying men, and very serviceable in their day to the church of God and the interests of religion, were really greater men and more honourable, not only than any of the Roman consuls or dictators, but than Xenophon, or Demosthenes, or Plato himself, who lived at the same time, the bright ornaments of Greece. Nehemiah's agency for the advancing of the settlement of Israel we have a full account of in this book of his own commentaries or memoirs, wherein he records not only the works of his hands, but the workings of his heart, in the management of public affairs, inserting in the story many devout reflections and ejaculations, which discover in his mind a very deep tincture of serious piety and are peculiar to his writing. Twelve years, from his twentieth year (ch. 1:1) to his thirty-second year (ch. 13:6), he was governor of Judea, under Artaxerxes king of Persia, whom Dr. Lightfoot supposes to be the same Artaxerxes as Ezra has his commission from. This book relates, I. Nehemiah's concern for Jerusalem and the commission he obtained from the king to go thither, ch. 1, 2. II. His building the wall of Jerusalem notwithstanding the opposition he met with, ch. 3, 4. III. His redressing the grievances of the people, ch. 5. IV. His finishing the wall, ch. 6. V. The account he took of the people, ch. 7. VI. The religions solemnities of reading the law, fasting, and praying, and renewing their covenants, to which he called the people (ch. 8–10). VII. The care he took for the replenishing of the holy city and the settling of the holy tribe, ch. 11, 12. VIII. His zeal in reforming various abuses, ch. 13. Some call this *the second book of Ezra*, not because he was the penman of it, but because it is a continuation of the history of the foregoing book, with which it is connected (v. 1). This was the last *historical* book that was written, as Malachi was the last *prophetical* book, of the Old Testament.

Chapter 1

Here we first meet with Nehemiah at the Persian court, where we find him, I. Inquisitive concerning the state of the Jews and Jerusalem (v. 1, 2). II. Informed of their deplorable condition (v. 3). III. Fasting and praying thereupon (v. 4), with a particular account of his prayer (v. 5–11). Such is the rise of this great man, by piety, not by policy.

Verses 1-4

What a tribe Nehemiah was of does nowhere appear; but, if it be true (which we are told by the author of the Maccabees, 2 Mac. 1:18) that he offered sacrifice, we must conclude him to have been a priest. Observe,

I. Nehemiah's station at the court of Persia. We are here told that he was *in Shushan the palace*, or royal city, of the king of Persia, where the court was ordinarily kept (v. 1), and (v. 11) that he was *the king's cup-bearer*. Kings and great men probably looked upon it as a piece of state to be attended by those of other nations. By this place at court he would be the better qualified for the service of his country in that post for which God had designed him, as Moses was the fitter to govern for being bred up in Pharaoh's court, and David in Saul's. He would also have the fairer opportunity of serving his country by his interest in the king and those about him. Observe, He is not forward to tell us what great preferment he had at court; it is not till the end of the chapter that he tells us he was *the king's cup-bearer* (a place of great trust, as well as of honour and profit), when he could not avoid the mentioning of it because of the following story; but at first he only said, *I was in Shushan the palace*. We may hence learn to be humble and modest, and slow to speak of our own advancements. But in the providences of God concerning him we may observe, to our comfort, 1. That when God has work to do he will never want instruments to do it with. 2. That those whom God designs to employ in his service he will find out proper ways both to fit for it and to call to it. 3. That God has his remnant in all places; we read of Obadiah in the house of Ahab, saints in Caesar's household, and a devout Nehemiah in Shushan the palace. 4. That God can make the courts of princes sometimes nurseries and sometimes sanctuaries to the friends and patrons of the church's cause.

II. Nehemiah's tender and compassionate enquiry concerning the state of the Jews in their own land, v. 2. It happened that a friend and relation of his came to the court, with some other company, by whom he had an opportunity of informing himself fully how it went with the children of the captivity and what posture Jerusalem, the beloved city, was in. Nehemiah lived at ease, in honour and fulness, himself, but could not forget that he was an Israelite, nor shake off the thoughts of his brethren in distress, but in spirit (like Moses, Acts 7:23) he *visited them and looked upon their burdens*. As distance of place did not alienate his affections from them (though they were out of sight, yet not out of mind), so neither did, 1. The dignity to which he was advanced. Though he was a great man, and probably rising higher, yet he did not think it below him to take cognizance of his brethren that were low and despised, nor was he ashamed to own his relation to them and concern for them. 2. The diversity of their sentiments from his, and the difference of their practice accordingly. Though he did not go to settle at Jerusalem himself (as we think he ought to have done now that liberty was proclaimed), but conformed to the court, and staid there, yet he did not therefore judge nor despise those that had returned, nor upbraid them as impolitic, but kindly concerned himself for

them, was ready to do them all the good offices he could, and, that he might know which way to do them a kindness, *asked concerning them*. Note, It is lawful and good to enquire, "What news?" We should enquire especially concerning the state of the church and religion, and how it fares with the people of God; and the design of our enquiry must be, not that, like the Athenians, we may have something to talk of, but that we may know how to direct our prayers and our praises.

III. The melancholy account which is here given him of the present state of the Jews and Jerusalem, v. 3. Hanani, the person he enquired of, has this character given of him (ch. 7:2), that he *feared God above many*, and therefore would not only speak truly, but, when he spoke of the desolations of Jerusalem, would speak tenderly. It is probable that his errand to court at this time was to solicit some favour, some relief or other, that they stood in need of. Now the account he gives is, 1. That the holy seed was miserably trampled on and abused, *in great affliction and reproach*, insulted upon all occasions by their neighbours, and *filled with the scorning of those that were at ease*. 2. That the holy city was exposed and in ruins. *The wall of Jerusalem was still broken down, and the gates* were, as the Chaldeans left them, in ruins. This made the condition of the inhabitants both very despicable under the abiding marks of poverty and slavery, and very dangerous, for their enemies might when they pleased make an easy prey of them. The temple was built, the government settled, and a work of reformation brought to some head, but here was one good work yet undone; this was still wanting. Every Jerusalem, on this side the heavenly one, will have some defect or other in it, for the making up of which it will required the help and service of its friends.

IV. The great affliction this gave to Nehemiah and the deep concern it put him into, v. 4. 1. He *wept and mourned*. It was not only just when he heard the news that he fell into a passion of weeping, but his sorrow continued *certain days*. Note, The desolations and distresses of the church ought to be the matter of our grief, how much soever we live at ease. 2. He *fasted and prayed*; not in public (he had no opportunity of doing that), but *before the God of heaven*, who sees in secret, and will reward openly. By his fasting and praying, (1.) He consecrated his sorrows, and directed his tears aright, *sorrowed after a godly sort*, with an eye to God, because his name was reproached in the contempt cast on his people, whose cause therefore he thus commits to him. (2.) He eased his sorrows, and unburdened his spirit, by pouring out his complaint before God and leaving it with him. (3.) He took the right method of fetching in relief for his people and direction for himself in what way to serve them. Let those who are forming any good designs for the service of the public take God along with them for the first conception of them, and utter all their projects before him; this is the way to prosper in them.

Verses 5-11

We have here Nehemiah's prayer, a prayer that has reference to all the prayers which he had for some time before been putting up to God day and night, while he continued his sorrows for the desolations of Jerusalem, and withal to the petition he was now intending to present to the king his master for his favour to Jerusalem. We may observe in this prayer,

I. His humble and reverent address to God, in which he prostrates himself before him, and gives unto him the glory due unto his name, v. 5. It is much the same with that of Daniel, ch. 9:4. It teaches us to draw near to God, 1. With a holy awe of his majesty and glory, remembering that he is the God of heaven, infinitely above us, and sovereign Lord over us, and that he is *the great and terrible God*, infinitely excelling all the principalities and powers both of the upper and of the lower world,

angels and kings; and he is a God to be worshipped with fear by all his people, and whose powerful wrath all his enemies have reason to be afraid of. Even the terrors of the Lord are improvable for the comfort and encouragement of those that trust in him. 2. With a holy confidence in his grace and truth, for he *keepeth covenant and mercy for those that love him*, not only the mercy that is promised, but even more than he promised: nothing shall be thought too much to be done for those that *love him and keep his commandments*.

II. His general request for the audience and acceptance of all the prayers and confessions he now made to God (v. 6): "*Let thy ear be attentive to the prayer*, not which I *say* (barely *saying* prayer will not serve), but which I *pray* before thee (then we are likely to speed in praying when we pray in praying), and let *they eyes be open* upon the heart from which the prayer comes, and the case which is in prayer laid before thee." God *formed the eye and planted the ear*; and therefore shall he not see clearly? shall not he hear attentively?

III. His penitent confession of sin; not only Israel has sinned (it was no great mortification to him to own that), but *I and my father's house have sinned*, v. 6. Thus does he humble himself, and take shame to himself, in this confession. *We have* (I and my family among the rest) *dealt very corruptly against thee*, v. 7. In the confession of sin, let these two things be owned as the malignity of it—that it is a corruption of ourselves and an affront to God; it is *dealing corruptly against God*, setting up the corruptions of our own hearts in opposition to the commands of God.

IV. The pleas he urges for mercy for his people Israel.

1. He pleads what God had of old said to them, the rule he had settled of his proceedings towards them, which might be the rule of their expectations from him, v. 8, 9. He had said indeed that, if they broke covenant with him, he would *scatter them among the nations*, and that threatening was fulfilled in their captivity: never was people so widely dispersed as Israel was at this time, though at first so closely incorporated; but he had said withal that if they *turned to him* (as now they began to do, having renounced idolatry and kept to the temple service) he would *gather them again*. This he quotes from Deu. 30:1-5, and begs leave to put God in mind of it (though the Eternal Mind needs no remembrancer) as that which he guided his desires by, and grounded his faith and hope upon, in praying this prayer: *Remember, I beseech thee, that word*; for thou hast said, *Put me in remembrance*. He had owned (v. 7), *We have not kept the judgments which thou commandedst thy servant Moses*; yet he begs (v. 8), Lord, *remember the word which thou commandedst thy servant Moses*; for the covenant is often said to be commanded. If God were not more mindful of his promises than we are of his precepts we should be undone. Our best pleas therefore in prayer are those that are taken from the promise of God, the *word on which he has caused us to hope*, Ps. 119:49.

2. He pleads the relation wherein of old they stood to God: "These are *thy servants and thy people* (v. 10), whom thou hast set apart for thyself, and taken into covenant with thee. Wilt thou suffer thy sworn enemies to trample upon and oppress thy sworn servants? If thou wilt not appear for thy people, whom wilt thou appear for?" See Isa. 63:19. As an evidence of their being God's servants he gives them this character (v. 11): "*They desire to fear thy name*; they are not only called by thy name, but really have a reverence for thy name; they now worship thee, and thee only, according to thy will, and have an awe of all the discoveries thou art pleased to make of thyself; this they have a desire to do," which denotes, (1.) Their good will to it. "It is

their constant care and endeavour to be found in the way of their duty, and they aim at it, though in many instances they come short." (2.) Their complacency in it. "They take pleasure to fear thy name (so it may be read), not only do their duty, but do it with delight." Those shall graciously be accepted of God that truly desire to fear his name; for such a desire is his own work.

3. He pleads the great things God had formerly done for them (v. 10): "*Whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power*, in the days of old. Thy power is still the same; wilt thou not therefore still redeem them and perfect their redemption? Let not those be overpowered by the enemy that have a God of infinite power on their side."

Lastly, He concludes with a particular petition, that God would prosper him in his undertaking, and give him favour with the king: *this man* he calls him, for the greatest of men are but men before God; they must know themselves to be so (Ps. 9:20), and others must know them to be so. *Who art thou that thou shouldst be afraid of a man? Mercy in the sight of this man* is what he prays for, meaning not the king's mercy, but mercy from God in his address to the king. Favour with men is then comfortable when we can see it springing from the mercy of God.

Chapter 2

How Nehemiah wrestled with God and prevailed we read in the foregoing chapter; now here we are told how, like Jacob, he prevailed with men also, and so found that his prayers were heard and answered. I. He prevailed with the king to send him to Jerusalem with a commission to build a wall about it, and grant him what was necessary for it (v. 1-8). II. He prevailed against the enemies that would have obstructed him in his journey (v. 9-11) and laughed him out of his undertaking (v. 19, 20). III. He prevailed upon his own people to join with him in this good work, viewing the desolations of the walls (v. 12-16) and then gaining them to lend every one a hand towards the rebuilding of them (v. 17, 18). Thus did God own him in the work to which he called him.

Verses 1-8

When Nehemiah had prayed for the relief of his countrymen, and perhaps in David's words (Ps. 51:18, *Build thou the walls of Jerusalem*), he did not sit still and say, "Let God now do his own work, for I have no more to do," but set himself to forecast what he could do towards it. our prayers must be seconded with our serious endeavours, else we mock God. Nearly four months passed, from Chisleu to Nisan (from November to March), before Nehemiah made his application to the king for leave to go to Jerusalem, either because the winter was not a proper time for such a journey, and he would not make the motion till he could pursue it, or because it was so long before his month of waiting came, and there was no coming into the king's presence uncalled, Esth. 4:11. Now that he attended the king's table he hoped to have his ear. We are not thus limited to certain moments in our addresses to the King of kings, but have liberty of access to him at all times; to the throne of grace we never come unseasonably. Now here is,

I. The occasion which he gave the king to enquire into his cares and griefs, by appearing sad in his presence. Those that speak to such great men must not fall abruptly upon their business, but fetch a compass. Nehemiah would try whether he was in a good humour before he ventured to tell him his errand, and this method he took to try him. He took up the wine and gave it to the king when he called for it, expecting that then he would look him in the face. He had not used to be sad in the king's presence, but conformed to the rules of the court (as courtiers must do), which would admit no sorrows, Esth. 4:2. Though he was a stranger, a captive, he was easy and pleasant. Good men should do what they can by their cheerfulness to convince the world of the pleasantness of religious ways and to roll away the reproach cast upon them as melancholy; but there is a time for all things, Eccl. 3:4. Nehemiah now saw cause both to be sad and to appear so. The miseries of Jerusalem gave him cause to be sad, and his showing his grief would give occasion to the king to enquire into the cause. He did not dissemble sadness, for he was really in grief for the afflictions of Joseph, and was not like the hypocrites who *disfigure their faces*; yet he could have concealed his grief if it had been necessary (the heart knows its own bitterness, and in the midst of laughter is often sad), but it would now serve his purpose to discover his sadness. Though he had wine before him, and probably, according to the office of the cup-bearer, did himself drink of it before he gave it to the king, yet it would not *make his heart glad*, while God's Israel was in distress.

II. The kind notice which the king took of his sadness and the enquiry he made into the cause of it (v. 2): *Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick?* Note, 1. We ought, from a principle of Christian sympathy, to concern ourselves in the sorrows and sadnesses of others, even of our inferiors, and not say, What is it to us? Let not masters despise their servants' griefs, but desire to make them easy. The great God is not pleased with the dejections and disquietments of his people, but would have them both *serve him with gladness* and *eat their bread with joy*. 2. It is not strange if those that are sick have sad countenances, because of what is felt and what is feared; sickness will make those grave that were most airy and gay: yet a good man, even in sickness, may be of good cheer if he knows that his sins are forgiven. 3. Freedom from sickness is so great a mercy that while we have that we ought not to be inordinately dejected under any outward burden; yet sorrow for our own sins, the sins of others, and the calamities of God's church, may well sadden the countenance, without sickness.

III. The account which Nehemiah gave the king of the cause of his sadness, which he gave with meekness and fear. 1. With fear. He owned that now (though it appears by the following story that he was a man of courage) *he was sorely afraid*, perhaps of the king's wrath (for those eastern monarchs assumed an absolute power of life and death, Dan. 2:12, 13; 5:19) or of misplacing a word, and losing his request by the mismanagement of it. Though he was a wise man, he was jealous of himself, lest he should say any thing imprudently; it becomes us to be so. A good assurance is indeed a good accomplishment, yet a humble self-diffidence is not man's dispraise. 2. With meekness. Without reflection upon any man, and with all the respect, deference, and good-will, imaginable to the king his master, he says, "*Let the king live for ever; he is wise and good, and the fittest man in the world to rule.*" He modestly asked, "*Why should not my countenance be sad as it is when (though I myself am well and at ease) the city*" (the king knew what city he meant), "*the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste?*" Many are melancholy and sad but can give no reason for being so, cannot tell why nor wherefore; such should chide themselves for, and chide themselves out of, their unjust and unreasonable griefs and fears. But Nehemiah could give so good a reason for his sadness as to appeal to the king himself concerning it. Observe, (1.) He calls Jerusalem *the place of his fathers' sepulchres*, the place where his ancestors were buried. It is good for us to think often of our fathers' sepulchres; we are apt to dwell in our thoughts upon their honours and titles, their houses and estates, but let us think also of their sepulchres, and consider that those who have gone before us in the world have also gone before us out of the world, and their monuments are momentos to us. There is also a great respect owing to the memory of our fathers, which we should not be willing to see injured. All nations, even those that have had no expectation of the resurrection of the dead, have looked upon the sepulchres of their ancestors as in some degree sacred and not to be violated. (2.) He justifies himself in his grief: "I do well to be sad. Why should I not be so?" There is a time even for pious and prosperous men to be sad and to show their grief. The best men must not think to antedate heaven by banishing all sorrowful thoughts; it is a vale of tears we pass through, and we must submit to the temper of the climate. (3.) He assigns the ruins of Jerusalem as the true cause of his grief. Note, All the grievances of the church, but especially its desolations, are, and ought to be, matter of grief and sadness to all good people, to all that have a concern for God's honour and that are living members of Christ's mystical body, and are of a public spirit; they favour even Zion's dust, Ps. 102:14.

IV. The encouragement which the king gave him to tell his mind, and the application he thereupon made in his heart to God, v. 4. The king had an affection for him, and was not pleased to see him melancholy. It is also probable that he had a kindness for the Jews' religion; he had discovered it before in the commission he gave to Ezra, who was a churchman, and now again in the power he put Nehemiah into, who was a statesman. Wanting therefore only to know how he might be serviceable to Jerusalem, he asks this its anxious friend, "*For what dost thou make request? Something thou wouldst have; what is it?*" He was afraid to speak (v. 2), but this gave him boldness; much more may the invitation Christ has given us to pray, and the promise that we shall speed, enable us to come boldly to the throne of grace. Nehemiah immediately *prayed to the God of heaven* that he would give him wisdom to ask properly and incline the king's heart to grant him his request. Those that would find favour with kings must secure the favour of the King of kings. He prayed to the God of heaven as infinitely above even this mighty monarch. It was not a solemn prayer (he had not opportunity for that), but a secret sudden ejaculation; he lifted up his heart to that God who understands the language of his heart: *Lord, give me a mouth and wisdom; Lord, give me favour in the sight of this man.* Note, It is good to be much in pious ejaculations, especially upon particular occasions. Wherever we are we have a way open heaven-ward. This will not hinder any business, but further it rather; therefore let no business hinder this, but give rise to it rather. Nehemiah had prayed very solemnly with reference to this very occasion (ch. 1:11), yet, when it comes to the push, he prays again. Ejaculations and solemn prayers must not jostle out one another, but each have its place.

V. His humble petition to the king. When he had this encouragement he presented his petition very modestly and with submission to the king's wisdom (v. 5), but very explicitly. He asked for a commission to go as governor to Judah, to build the wall of Jerusalem, and to stay there for a certain time, so many months, we may suppose; and then either he had his commission renewed or went back and was sent again, so that he presided there twelve years at least, ch. 5:14. He also asked for a convoy (v. 7), and an order upon the governors, not only to permit and suffer him to pass through their respective provinces, but to supply him with what he had occasion for, with another order upon the keeper of the forest of Lebanon to give him timber for the work that he designed.

VI. The king's great favour to him in asking him *when he would return*, v. 6. He intimated that he was unwilling to lose him, or to be long without him, yet to gratify him, and do a real office of kindness to his people, he would spare him awhile, and let him have what clauses he pleased inserted in his commission, v. 8. Here was an immediate answer to his prayer; for the seed of Jacob never sought the God of Jacob in vain. In the account he gives of the success of his petition he takes notice, 1. Of the presence of the queen; she sat by (v. 6), which (they say) was not usual in the Persian court, Esth. 1:11. Whether the queen was his back friend, that would have hindered him, and he observes it to the praise of God's powerful providence that though she was by yet he succeeded, or whether she was his true friend, and it is observed to the praise of God's kind providence that she was present to help forward his request, is not certain. 2. Of the power and grace of God. He gained his point, not according to his merit, his interest in the king, or his good management, but *according to the good hand of his God upon him.* Gracious souls take notice of God's hand, his good hand, in all events which turn in favour of them. *This is the Lord's doing*, and therefore doubly acceptable.

Verses 9-20

We are here told,

I. Now Nehemiah was dismissed by the court he was sent from. The king appointed *captains of the army and horsemen* to go *with him* (v. 9), both for his guard and to show that he was a man whom *the king did delight to honour*, that all the king's servants might respect him accordingly. Those whom the King of kings sends he thus protects, he thus dignifies with a host of angels to attend them.

II. How he was received by the country he was sent to.

1. By the Jews and their friends at Jerusalem. We are told,

(1.) That while he concealed his errand they took little notice of him. He was at *Jerusalem three days* (v. 11), and it does not appear that any of the great men of the city waited on him to congratulate him on his arrival, but he remained unknown. The king sent horsemen to attend him, but the Jews sent none to meet him; he had no beast with him, but that which he himself rode on, v. 12. Wise men, and those who are worthy of double honour, yet covet not to come with observation, to make a show, or make a noise, no, not when they come with the greatest blessings. Those that shortly are to have *the dominion in the morning* the world now knows not, but they lie hid, 1 Jn. 3:1.

(2.) That though they took little notice of him he took great notice of them and their state. He arose in the night, and viewed the ruins of the walls, probably by moon-light (v. 13), that he might see what was to be done and in what method they must go about it, whether the old foundation would serve, and what there was of the old materials that would be of use. Note, [1.] Good work is likely to be well done when it is first well considered. [2.] It is the wisdom of those who are engaged in public business, as much as may be, to *see with their own eyes*, and not to proceed altogether upon the reports and representations of others, and yet to do this without noise, and if possible unobserved. [3.] Those that would build up the church's walls must first take notice of the ruins of those walls. Those that would know how to amend must enquire what is amiss, what needs reformation, and what may serve as it is.

(3.) That when he disclosed his design to the rulers and people they cheerfully concurred with him in it. He did not tell them, at first, what he came about (v. 16), because he would not seem to do it for ostentation, and because, if he found it impracticable, he might retreat the more honourably. Upright humble men will not sound a trumpet before their alms or any other of their good offices. But when he had viewed and considered the thing, and probably felt the pulse of the rulers and people, he told them *what God had put into his heart* (v. 12), even to *build up the wall of Jerusalem*, v. 17. Observe, [1.] How fairly he proposed the undertaking to them: "*You see the distress we are in*, how we lie exposed to the enemies that are round about us, how justly they reproach us as foolish and despicable, how easily they may make a prey of us whenever they have a mind; *come, therefore, and let us build up the wall.*" He did not undertake to do the work without them (it could not be the work of one man), nor did he charge or command imperiously, though he had the king's commission; but in a friendly brotherly way he exhorted and excited them to join with him in this work. To encourage them hereto, he speaks of the design, *First*, As that which owed its origin to the special grace of God. He takes not the praise of it to himself, as a good thought of his own, but

acknowledges that God *put it into his heart*, and therefore they all ought to countenance it (whatever is of God must be promoted), and might hope to prosper in it, for what God puts men upon he will own them in. *Secondly*, As that which owed its progress hitherto to the special providence of God. He produced the king's commission, told them how readily it was granted and how forward the king was to favour his design, in which he saw the hand of his God *good upon him*. It would encourage both him and them to proceed in an undertaking which God had so remarkably smiled upon. Thus he proposed it to them; and, [2.] They presently came to a resolution, one and all, to concur with him: *Let us rise up and build*. They are ashamed that they have sat still so long without so much as attempting this needful work, and now resolve to rise up out of their slothfulness, to bestir themselves, and to stir up one another. "*Let us rise up,*" that is, "let us do it with vigour, and diligence, and resolution, as those that are determined to go through with it." *So they strengthened their hands*, their own and one another's, *for this good work*. Note, *First*, Many a good work would find hands enough to be laid to it if there were but one good head to lead in it. They all saw the desolations of Jerusalem, yet none proposed the repair of them; but, when Nehemiah proposed it, they all consented to it. It is a pity that a good motion should be lost purely for want of one to move it and to break the ice in it. *Secondly*, By stirring up ourselves and one another to that which is good, we strengthen ourselves and one another for it; for the great reason why we are weak in our duty is because we are cold to it, indifferent and unresolved. Let us now see how Nehemiah was received,

2. By those that wished ill to the Jews. Those whom God and his Israel blessed they cursed. (1.) When he did but show his face it vexed them, v. 10. Sanballat and Tobiah, two of the Samaritans, but by birth the former a Moabite, the latter an Ammonite, when they saw one come armed with a commission from the king to do service to Israel, *were exceedingly grieved* that all their little paltry arts to weaken Israel were thus baffled and frustrated by a fair, and noble, and generous project to strengthen them. Nothing is a greater vexation to the enemies of good people, who have misrepresented them to princes as turbulent, and factious, and not fit to live, than to see them stand right in the opinion of their rulers, their innocency cleared and their reproach rolled away, and that they are thought not only fit to live, but fit to be trusted. When they saw a man come in that manner, who professedly *sought the welfare of the children of Israel*, it vexed them to the heart. *The wicked shall see it, and be grieved*. (2.) When he began to act they set themselves to hinder him, but in vain, v. 19, 20. [1.] See here with what little reason the enemies attempted to discourage him. They represented the undertaking as a silly thing: *They laughed us to scorn and despised us* as foolish builders, that could not finish what we began. They represented the undertaking also as a wicked thing, no better than treason: *Will you rebel against the king?* Because this was the old invidious charge, though now they had a commission from the king and were taken under his protection, yet still they must be called rebels. [2.] See also with what good reason the Jews slighted these discouragements. They bore up themselves with this that they were the *servants of the God of heaven*, the only true and living God, that they were acting for him in what they did, and that therefore he would bear them out and prosper them, though the heathen raged, Ps. 2:1. They considered also that the reason why these enemies did so malign them was because they had no right in Jerusalem, but envied them their right in it. Thus may the impotent menaces of the church's enemies be easily despised by the church's friends.

Chapter 3

Saying and doing are often two things: many are ready to say, "Let us rise up and build," who sit still and do nothing, like that fair-spoken son who said, "I go, Sir, but went not." The undertakers here were none of those. As soon as they had resolved to build the wall about Jerusalem they lost no time, but set about it presently, as we find in this chapter. Let it never be said that we left that good work to be done to-morrow which we might as well have done to-day. This chapter gives an account of two things:—I. The names of the builders, which are recorded here to their honour, for they were such as herein discovered a great zeal for God and their country, both a pious and a public spirit, a great degree both of industry and courage; and what they did was fit to be thus largely registered, both for their praise and for the encouragement of others to follow their example. II. The order of the building; they took it before them, and ended where they began. They repaired, 1. From the sheep-gate to the fish-gate (v. 1, 2). 2. Thence to the old-gate (v. 3-5). 3. Thence to the valley-gate (v. 6-12). 4. Thence to the dung-gate (v. 13, 14). 5. Thence to the gate of the fountain (v. 15). 6. Thence to the water-gate (v. 16-26). 7. Thence by the horse-gate to the sheep-gate again, where they began (v. 27-32), and so they brought their work quite round the city.

Verses 1-32

The best way to know how to divide this chapter is to observe how the work was divided among the undertakers, that every one might know what he had to do, and mind it accordingly with a holy emulation, and desire to excel, yet without any contention, animosity, or separate interest. No strife appears among them but which should do most for the public good. Several things are observable in the account here given of the building of the wall about Jerusalem:—

I. That Eliashib the high priest, with his brethren the priests, led the van in this troop of builders, v. 1. Ministers should be foremost in every good work; for their office obliges them to teach and quicken by their example, as well as by their doctrine. If there be labour in it, who so fit as they to work? if danger, who so fit as they to venture? The dignity of the high priest was very great, and obliged him to signalize himself in this service. The priests repaired the *sheep-gate*, so called because through it were brought the sheep that were to be sacrificed in the temple; and therefore the priests undertook the repair of it because *the offerings of the Lord made by fire were* their inheritance. And of this gate only it is said that *they sanctified it* with the word and prayer, and perhaps with sacrifices perhaps, 1. Because it led to the temple; or, 2. Because with this the building of the wall began, and it is probable (though they were at work in all parts of the wall at the same time) that this was first finished, and therefore at this gate they solemnly committed their city and the walls of it to the divine protection; or, 3. Because the priests were the builders of it; and it becomes ministers above others, being themselves in a peculiar manner sanctified to God, to sanctify to him all their performances, and to do even their common actions *after a godly sort*.

II. That the undertakers were very many, who each took his share, some more and some less, in this work, according as their ability was. Note, What is to be done for the public good every one should assist in, and further, to the utmost of his place and power. United force will conquer that which no individual dares venture on. Many hands will make light work.

III. That many were active in this work who were not themselves inhabitants of Jerusalem, and therefore consulted purely the

public welfare and not any private interest or advantage of their own. Here are the men of Jericho with the first (v. 2), the men of Gibeon and Mizpah (v. 7), and Zanoah, v. 13. Every Israelite should lend a hand towards the building up of Jerusalem.

IV. That several rulers, both of Jerusalem and of other cities, were active in this work, thinking themselves bound in honour to do the utmost that their wealth and power enabled them to do for the furtherance of this good work. But it is observable that they are called rulers of *part*, or the *half part*, of their respective cities. One was *ruler of the half part of Jerusalem* (v. 12), another of part of Beth-haccerem (v. 14), another of part of Mizpah (v. 15), another of *the half part of Beth-zur* (v. 16), one was ruler of *one half part*, and another of *the other half part, of Keilah*, v. 17, 18. Perhaps the Persian government would not entrust any one with a strong city, but appointed two to be a watch upon each other. Rome had two consuls.

V. Here is a just reproach fastened upon the nobles of Tekoa, that they *put not their necks to the work of their Lord* (v. 5), that is, they would not come under the yoke of an obligation to this service; as if the dignity and liberty of their peerage were their discharge from serving God and doing good, which are indeed the highest honour and the truest freedom. Let not nobles think any thing below them by which they may advance the interests of their country; for what else is their nobility good for but that it puts them in a higher and larger sphere of usefulness than that in which inferior persons move?

VI. Two persons joined in repairing *the old gate* (v. 6), and so were co-founders, and shared the honour of it between them. The good work which we cannot compass ourselves we must be thankful to those that will go partners with us in. Some think that this is called the *old gate* because it belonged to the ancient Salem, which was said to be first built by Melchizedek.

VII. Several good honest tradesmen, as well as priests and rulers, were active in this work—*goldsmiths, apothecaries, merchants*, v. 8, 32. They did not think their callings excused them, nor plead that they could not leave their shops to attend the public business, knowing that what they lost would certainly be made up to them by the blessing of God upon their callings.

VIII. Some ladies are spoken of as helping forward this work—*Shallum and his daughters* (v. 12), who, though not capable of personal service, yet having their portions in their own hands, or being rich widows, contributed money for buying materials and paying workmen. St. Paul speaks of some good women that *laboured with him in the gospel*, Phil. 4:3.

IX. Of some it is said that they repaired *over against their houses* (v. 10, 23, 28, 29), and of one (who, it is likely, was only a lodger) that he repaired *over against his chamber*, v. 30. When a general good work is to be done each should apply himself to that part of it that falls nearest to him and is within his reach. If every one will sweep before his own door, the street will be clean; if every one will mend one, we shall be all mended. If he that has but a chamber will repair before that, he does his part.

X. Of one it is said that he *earnestly* repaired that which fell to his share (v. 20)—he did it with an inflamed zeal; not that others were cold or indifferent, but he was the most vigorous of any of them and consequently made himself remarkable. It is good to be thus *zealously affected in a good thin*; and it is probable that this good man's zeal provoked very many to take the more pains and make the more haste.

XI. Of one of these builders it is observed that he was *the sixth son* of his father, v. 30. His five elder brethren, it seems, laid not their hand to this work, but he did. In doing that which is good we need not stay to see our elders go before us; if they decline it, it does not therefore follow that we must. Thus the younger brother, if he be the better man, and does God and his

generation better service, is indeed the better gentleman; those are most honourable that are most useful.

XII. Some of those that had *first done helped their fellows*, and undertook another share where they saw there was most need. Meremoth repaired, v. 4. and again, v. 21. And the Tekoites, besides the piece they repaired (v. 5), undertook another piece (v. 27), which is the more remarkable because their nobles set them a bad example by withdrawing from the service, which, instead of serving them for an excuse to sit still, perhaps made them the more forward to do double work, that by their zeal they might either shame or atone for the covetousness and carelessness of their nobles.

Lastly, Here is no mention of any particular share that Nehemiah himself had in this work. A name-sake of his is mentioned, v. 16. But did he do nothing? Yes, though he undertook not any particular piece of the wall, yet he did more than any of them, for he had the oversight of them all; half of his servants worked where there was most need, and the other half stood sentinel, as we find afterwards (ch. 4:16), while he himself in his own person walked the rounds, directed and encouraged the builders, set his hand to the work where he saw occasion, and kept a watchful eye upon the motions of the enemy, as we shall find in the next chapter. The pilot needs not haul at a rope: it is enough for him to steer.

Chapter 4

We left all hands at work for the building of the wall about Jerusalem. But such good work is not wont to be carried on without opposition; now here we are told what opposition was given to it, and what methods Nehemiah took to forward the work, notwithstanding that opposition. I. Their enemies reproached and ridiculed their undertaking, but their scoffs they answered with prayers: they heeded them not, but went on with their work notwithstanding (v. 1-6). II. They formed a bloody design against them, to hinder them by force of arms (v. 7, 8, 10-12). To guard against this Nehemiah prayed (v. 9), set guards (v. 13), and encouraged them to fight (v. 14), by which the design was broken (v. 15), and so the work was carried on with all needful precaution against a surprise (v. 16-23). In all this Nehemiah approved himself a man of great wisdom and courage, as well as great piety.

Verses 1-6

Here is, I. The spiteful scornful reflection which Sanballat and Tobiah cast upon the Jews for their attempt to build the wall about Jerusalem. The country rang of it presently; intelligence was brought of it to Samaria, that nest of enemies to the Jews and their prosperity; and here we are told how they received the tidings. 1. In heart. They were very angry at the undertaking, and had *great indignation*, v. 1. It vexed them that Nehemiah came to seek the welfare of the children of Israel (ch. 2:10); but, when they heard of this great undertaking for their good, they were out of all patience. They had hitherto pleased themselves with the thought that while Jerusalem was unwalled they could swallow it up and make themselves masters of it when they pleased; but, if it be walled, it will not only be fenced against them, but by degrees become formidable to them. The strength and safety of the church are the grief and vexation of its enemies. 2. In word. They despised it, and made it the subject of their ridicule. In this they sufficiently displayed their malice; but good was brought out of it; for, looking upon it as a foolish undertaking that would sink under its own weight, they did not go about to obstruct it till it was too late. Let us see with what pride and malice they set themselves publicly to banter it. (1.) Sanballat speaks with scorn of the workmen: "*These feeble Jews*" (v. 2), "what will they do for materials? *Will they revive the stones out of the rubbish?* And what mean they by being so hasty? Do they think to make the walling of a city but one day's work, and to keep the feast of dedication with sacrifice the next day? Poor silly people! See how ridiculous they make themselves!" (2.) Tobiah speaks with no less scorn of the work itself. He has his jest too, and must show his wit, v. 3. Profane scoffers sharpen one another. "Sorry work," says he, "they are likely to make of it; they themselves will be ashamed of it: *If a fox go up*, not with his subtlety, but with his weight, he *will break down their stone wall.*" Many a good work has been thus looked upon with contempt by the *proud and haughty scorners*.

II. Nehemiah's humble and devout address to God when he heard of these reflections. He had notice brought him of what they said. It is probable that they themselves sent him a message to this purport, to discourage him, hoping to jeer him out of his attempt; but he did not answer these fools according to their folly; he did not upbraid them with their weakness, but looked up to God by prayer.

1. He begs of God to take notice of the indignities that were done them (v. 4), and in this we are to imitate him: *Hear, O our God! for we are despised*. Note, (1.) God's people have often been a despised people, and loaded with contempt. (2.) God does, and will, hear all the slights that are put upon his people, and it is their comfort that he does so and a good reason why they should be as though they were deaf, Ps. 38:13, 15. "Thou art our God to whom we appeal; our cause needs no more than a fair hearing."

2. He begs of God to avenge their cause and turn the reproach upon the enemies themselves (v. 4, 5); and this was spoken rather by a spirit of prophecy than by a spirit of prayer, and is not to be imitated by us who are taught of Christ to *pray for* those that *despitefully use and persecute us*. Christ himself prayed for those that reproached him: *Father, forgive them*. Nehemiah here prays, *Cover not their iniquity*. Note, (1.) Those that cast contempt on God's people do but prepare everlasting shame for themselves. (2.) It is a sin from which sinners are seldom recovered. Doubtless Nehemiah had reason to think the hearts of those sinners were desperately hardened, so that they would never repent of it, else he would not have prayed that it might *never be blotted out*. The reason he gives is not, *They have abused us*, but, *They have provoked thee*, and that *before the builders*, to whom, it is likely, they sent a spiteful message. Note, We should be angry at the malice of persecutors, not because it is abusive to us, but because it is offensive to God; and on that we may ground an expectation that God will appear against it, Ps. 74:18, 22.

III. The vigour of the builders, notwithstanding these reflections, v. 6. They made such good speed that in a little time they had run up the wall to half its height, for *the people had a mind to work*; their hearts were upon it, and they would have it forwarded. Note, 1. Good work goes on well when people have a mind to it. 2. The reproaches of enemies should rather quicken us to our duty than drive us from it.

Verses 7-15

We have here,

I. The conspiracy which the Jews' enemies formed against them, to stay the building by slaying the builders. The conspirators were not only Sanballat and Tobiah, but other neighbouring people whom they had drawn into the plot. They flattered themselves with a fancy that the work would soon stand still of itself; but, when they heard that it went on and prospered, they were angry at the Jews for being so hasty to push the work forward and angry at themselves for being so slow in opposing it (v. 7): *They were very wroth. Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce, and their wrath, for it was cruel*. Nothing would serve but they would *fight against Jerusalem*, v. 8. Why, what quarrel had they with the Jews? Had they done them any wrong? Or did they design them any? No, they lived peaceably by them; but it was merely out of envy and malice; they hated the Jews' piety, and were therefore vexed at their prosperity and sought their ruin. Observe, 1. How unanimous they were: *They conspired all of them together*, though of different interests among themselves, yet one in their opposition to the work of God. 2. How close they were; they said, *"They shall not know, neither see, till we have them at our mercy."* Thus they took crafty counsel, and digged deep to hide it from the Lord, and promised themselves security and success from the secrecy of their management. 3. How cruel they were: *We will come and slay them*. If nothing less than the murder of the workmen will put a stop to the work,

they will not stick at that; nay, it is their blood they thirst for, and they are glad of any pretence to glut themselves with it. 4. What the design was and how confident they were of success: it was to *cause the work to cease* (v. 11), and this they were confident that they should effect. The hindering of good work is that which bad men aim at and promise themselves; but good work is God's work, and it shall prosper.

II. The discouragements which the builders themselves laboured under. At the very time when the adversaries said, Let us *cause the work to cease*, Judah said, "Let us even let it fall, for we are not able to go forward with it," v. 10. They represent the labourers as tired, and the remaining difficulties, even of that first part of their work, the removing of the rubbish, as insuperable, and therefore they think it advisable to desist for the present. Can Judah, that warlike valiant tribe, sneak thus? Active leading men have many times as much ado to grapple with the fears of their friends as with the terrors of their enemies.

III. The information that was brought to Nehemiah of the enemies' designs, v. 12. There were *Jews that dwelt by them*, in the country, who, though they had not zeal enough to bring them to Jerusalem to help their brethren in building the wall, yet, having by their situation opportunity to discover the enemies' motions, had so much honesty and affection to the cause as to give intelligence of them; nay, that their intelligence might be the more credited, they came themselves to give it, and they said it ten times, repeating it as men in earnest, and under a concern, and the report was confirmed by many witnesses. The intelligence they gave is expressed abruptly, and finds work for the critics to make out the sense of it, which perhaps is designed to intimate that they gave this intelligence as men out of breath and in confusion, whose very looks would make up the deficiencies of their words. I think it may be read, without supplying any thing: "*Whatever place you turn to, they are against us*, so that you have need to be upon your guard on all sides," Note, God has many ways of bringing to light, and so bringing to nought, the devices and designs of his and his church's enemies. Even the cold and feeble Jews that contentedly dwell by them shall be made to serve as spies upon them; nay, rather than fail, *a bird of the air shall carry their voice*.

IV. The pious and prudent methods which Nehemiah, hereupon, took to baffle the design, and to secure his work and workmen.

1. It is said (v. 14) he *looked*. (1.) He looked up, engaged God for him, and put himself and his cause under the divine protection (v. 9): *We made our prayer unto our God*. That was the way of this good man, and should be our way; all his cares, all his griefs, all his fears, he spread before God, and thereby made himself easy. This was the first thing he did; before he used any means, he made his prayer to God, for with him we must always begin. (2.) He looked about him. Having prayed, he *set a watch against them*. The instructions Christ has given us in our spiritual warfare agree with this example, Mt. 26:41. *Watch and pray*. If we think to secure ourselves by prayer only, without watchfulness, we are slothful and tempt God; if by watchfulness, without prayer, we are proud and slight God; and, either way, we forfeit his protection.

2. Observe, (1.) How he posted the guards, v. 13. *In the lower places* he set them *behind the wall*, that they might annoy the enemy over it, as a breast-work; but *in the higher places*, where the wall was raised to its full height, he set them upon it, that from the top of it they might throw down stones or darts upon the heads of the assailants: he set them *after their families*, that mutual relation might engage them to mutual assistance. (2.) How he animated and encouraged the people, v. 14. He observed

even the nobles and rulers themselves, as well as the rest of the people, to be in a great consternation upon the intelligence that was brought them, and ready to conclude that they were all undone, by which their hands were weakened both for work and war, and therefore, he endeavours to silence their fears. "Come," says he, "*be not afraid of them*, but behave yourselves valiantly, considering, [1.] Whom you fight under. You cannot have a better captain: *Remember the Lord, who is great and terrible*; you think your enemies *great and terrible*, but what are they in comparison with God, especially in opposition to him? He is great above them to control them, and will be terrible to them when he comes to reckon with them." Those that with an eye of faith see the church's God to be great and terrible will see the church's enemies to be mean and despicable. The reigning fear of God is the best antidote against the ensnaring fear of man. He that is afraid of *a man that shall die forgets the Lord his Maker*, Isa. 51:12, 13. [2.] "Whom you fight for. You cannot have a better cause; you fight for *your brethren* (Ps. 122:8), *your sons, and your daughters*. All that is dear to you in their world lies at stake; therefore *behave yourselves valiantly*."

V. The happy disappointment which this gave to the enemies, v. 15. When they found that their design was discovered, and that the Jews were upon their guard, they concluded that it was to no purpose to attempt any thing, but that *God had brought their counsel to nought*. They knew they could not gain their point but by surprise, and, if their plot was known, it was quashed. The Jews hereupon *returned every one to his work*, with so much the more cheerfulness because they saw plainly that God owned it and owned them in the doing of it. Note, God's care of our safety should engage and encourage us to go on with vigour in our duty. As soon as ever a danger is over let us *return to our work*, and trust God another time.

Verses 16-23

When the builders had so far reason to think the design of the enemies broken *as to return to their work*, yet they were not so secure as to lay down their arms, knowing how restless and unwearied they were in their attempts, and that, if one design failed, they would be hatching another. Thus must we watch always against our spiritual enemies, and not expect that our warfare will be accomplished till our work is. See what course Nehemiah took, that the people might hold themselves in a readiness, in case there should be an attack. 1. While one half were at work, the other half were under their arms, holding *spears, and shields, and bows*, not only for themselves but for the labourers too, who would immediately quit their work, and betake themselves to their weapons, upon the first alarm, v. 16. It is probable that they changed services at stated hours, which would relieve the fatigue of both, and particularly would be an ease to the *bearers of burdens*, whose *strength had decayed* (v. 10); while they held the weapons, they were eased and yet not idle. Thus dividing their time between the trowels and the spears, they are said to *work with one hand* and hold their weapons *with the other* (v. 17), which cannot be understood literally, for the work would require both hands; but it intimates that they were equally employed in both. Thus must we work out our salvation with the weapons of our warfare in our hand; for in every duty we must expect to meet with opposition from our spiritual enemies, against whom we must still be *fighting the good fight of faith*. 2. Every builder had a sword by his side (v. 18), which he could carry without hindering his labour. The word of God is the sword of the Spirit, which we ought to have always at hand and never to seek, both in our labours and in our conflicts as Christians. 3. Care was taken both to get and give early notice of the approach of the enemy, in case they should endeavour to surprise them. Nehemiah kept a trumpeter always

by him to sound an alarm, upon the first intimation of danger. The work was large, and the builders were dispersed; for in all parts of the wall they were labouring at the same time. Nehemiah continually walked round to oversee the work and encourage the workmen, and so would have speedy intelligence if the enemy made an attack, of which, by sound of trumpet, he would soon give notice to all, and they must immediately repair to him with a full assurance that their *God* would *fight for them*, v. 18–20. When they acted as workmen, it was requisite they should be dispersed wherever there was work to do; but when as soldiers it was requisite they should come into close order, and be found in a body. Thus should the labourers in Christ's building be ready to unite against a common foe. 4. The inhabitants of the villages were ordered to lodge within Jerusalem, with their servants, not only that they might be the nearer to their work in the morning, but that they might be ready to help in case of an attack in the night, v. 22. The strength of a city lies more in its hands than in its walls; secure them, and God's blessing upon them, and be secure. 5. Nehemiah himself, and all his men, kept closely to their business. The spears were held up, with the sight of them to terrify the enemy, not only from sun to sun, but from twilight to twilight every day, v. 21. Thus ought we to be always upon our guard against our spiritual enemies, not only (as here) while *it is light*, but when *it is dark*, for they are the *rulers of the darkness of this world*. Nay, so very intent was Nehemiah upon his work, and so fast did he hold his servants to it, that while the heat of the business lasted neither he himself nor his attendants went into bed, but every night lay and slept in their clothes (v. 23), except that they shifted them now and then, either for cleanliness or in a case of ceremonial pollution. It was a sign that their heart was upon their work when they could not find time to dress and undress, but resolved they would be at all times ready for service. Good work is likely to go on successfully when those that labour in it thus make a business of it

Chapter 5

How bravely Nehemiah, as a wise and faithful governor, stood upon his guard against the attacks of enemies abroad, we read in the foregoing chapter. Here we have him no less bold and active to redress grievances at home, and, having kept them from being destroyed by their enemies, to keep them from destroying one another. Here is, I. The complaint which the poor made to him of the great hardships which the rich (of whom they were forced to borrow money) put upon them, v. 1-5). II. The effectual course which Nehemiah took both to reform the oppressors and to relieve the oppressed (v. 6-13). III. The good example which he himself, as governor, set them of compassion and tenderness (v. 14-19).

Verses 1-5

We have here the tears of the oppressed, which Solomon considered, Eccl. 4:1. Let us consider them as here they are dropped before Nehemiah, whose office it was, as governor, to *deliver the poor and needy, and rid them out of the hand of the wicked oppressors*, Ps. 82:4. Hard times and hard hearts made the poor miserable.

I. The times they lived in were hard. There was a dearth of corn (v. 3), probably for want of rain, with which God had chastised their neglect of his house (Hag. 1:9-11) and the non-payment of their church-dues, Mal. 3:9, 10. Thus foolish sinful men bring God's judgments upon themselves, and then fret and complain of them. When the markets are high, and provisions scarce and dear, the poor soon feel from it, and are pinched by it. Blessed be God for the mercy, and God deliver us from the sin, of *fulness of bread*, Eze. 16:49. That which made the scarcity here complained of the more grievous was that their *sons and their daughters were many*, v. 2. The families that were most necessitous were most numerous; here were the mouths, but where was the meat? Some have estates and no children to inherit them; others have children and no estates to leave them. Those who have both have reason to be thankful; those who have neither may the more easily be content. Those who have great families and little substance must learn to live by faith in God's providence and promise; and those who have little families and great substance must *make their abundance a supply for the wants of others*. But this was not all: as corn was dear, so the taxes were high; the king's tribute must be paid, v. 4. This mark of their captivity still remained upon them. Perhaps it was a poll-money that was required, and then, their sons and their daughters being many, it rose the higher. The more they had to maintain (a hard case!) the more they had to pay. Now, it seems, they had not wherewithal of their own to buy corn and pay taxes, but were necessitated to borrow. Their families came poor out of Babylon; they had been at great expense in building them houses, and had not yet got up their strength when these new burdens came upon them. The straits of poor housekeepers who make hard shift to get an honest livelihood, and sometimes want what is fitting for them and their families, are well worthy the compassionate consideration of those who either with their wealth or with their power are in a capacity to help them.

II. The persons they dealt with were hard. Money must be had, but it must be borrowed; and those that lent them money, taking advantage of their necessity, were very hard upon them and made a prey of them. 1. They exacted interest from them at twelve per cent, the hundredth part every month, v. 11. If men borrow large sums to trade with, to increase their stocks, or to purchase land, there is no reason why the lender should not share with the borrower in his profit; or if to spend upon their lusts, or repair

what they have so spent, why should they not pay for their extravagances? But if the poor borrow to maintain their families, and we be able to help them, it is certain we ought either to lend freely what they have occasion for, or (if they be not likely to repay it) to give freely something towards it. Nay, 2. They forced them to mortgage to them their lands and houses for the securing of the money (v. 3), and not only so, but took the profits of them for interest (v. 5, compare v. 11), that by degrees they might make themselves masters of all they had. Yet this was not the worst. 3. They took their children for bond-servants, to be enslaved or sold at pleasure, v. 5. This they complain of most sensibly, as that which touched them in a tender part, and they aggravate it with this: "*Our children are as their children*, as dear to us as theirs are to them; not only of the same human nature, and entitled to the honours and liberties of that (Mal. 2:10; Job 31:15), but of the same holy nation, free-born Israelites, and dignified with the same privileges. Our flesh carries in it the sacred seal of the covenant of circumcision, as well *as the flesh of our brethren*; yet our heirs must be their slaves, and *it is not in our power to redeem them.*" This they made a humble remonstrance of to Nehemiah, not only because they saw he was a great man that could relieve them, but a good man that would. Whither should the injured poor flee for succour but *to the shields of the earth*? Whither but to the chancery, to the charity, in the royal breast, and those deputed by it for relief against the *summum jus—the extremity of the law*? Lastly, We will leave Nehemiah hearing the complaint, and enquiring into the truth of the complainants' allegations (for the clamours of the poor are not always just), while we sit down and look, (1.) With a gracious compassion upon the oppressed, and lament the hardships which many in the world are groaning under; putting our souls into their souls' stead, and remembering in our prayers and succours those that are burdened, as burdened with them. (2.) With a gracious indignation at the oppressors, and abhorrence of their pride and cruelty, who drink the tears, the blood, of those they have under their feet. But let those who show no mercy expect *judgment without mercy*. It was an aggravation of the sin of these oppressing Jews that they were themselves so lately delivered out of the house of bondage, which obliged them in gratitude to *undo the heavy burdens*, Isa. 58:6.

Verses 6-13

It should seem the foregoing complaint was made to Nehemiah at the time when he had his head and hands as full as possible of the public business about building the wall; yet, perceiving it to be just, he did not reject it because it was unseasonable; he did not chide the petitioners, nor fall into a passion with them, for disturbing him when they saw how much he had to do, a fault which men of business are too often guilty of; nor did he so much as adjourn the hearing of the cause or proceedings upon it till he had more leisure. The case called for speedy interposition, and therefore he applied himself immediately to the consideration of it, knowing that, let him build Jerusalem's walls ever so high, so thick, so strong, the city could not be safe while such abuses as these were tolerated. Now observe, What method he took for the redress of this grievance which was so threatening to the public.

I. He *was very angry* (v. 6); he expressed a great displeasure at it, as a very bad thing. Note, It well becomes rulers to show themselves angry at sin, that by the anger itself they may be excited to their duty, and by the expressions of it others may be deterred from evil.

II. He *consulted with himself*, v. 7. By this it appears that his anger was not excessive, but kept within bounds, that, though his spirit was provoked, he did not say or do any thing unadvisedly. Before he rebuked the nobles, he consulted with himself what to say, and when, and how. Note, Reproofs must be given with great consideration, that what is well meant may not come short of its end for want of being well managed. It is the *reproof of instruction* that *giveth life*. Even wise men lose the benefit of their wisdom sometimes for want of consulting with themselves and taking time to deliberate.

III. He *rebuked the nobles and rulers*, who were the monied men, and whose power perhaps made them the more bold to oppress. Note, Even nobles and rulers, if they do that which is evil, ought to be told of it by proper persons. Let no man imagine that his dignity sets him above reproof.

IV. He set a great assembly against them. He called the people together to be witnesses of what he said, and to bear their testimony (which the people will generally be forward to do) against the oppressions and extortions their rulers were guilty of, v. 12. Ezra and Nehemiah were both of them very wise, good, useful men, yet, in cases not unlike, there was a great deal of difference between their management: when Ezra was told of the sin of the rulers in marrying strange wives he rent his clothes, and wept, and prayed, and was hardly persuaded to attempt a reformation, fearing it to be impracticable, for he was a man of a mild tender spirit; when Nehemiah was told of as bad a thing he kindled immediately, reproached the delinquents, incensed the people against them, and never rested till, by all the rough methods he could use, he forced them to reform; for he was a man of a hot and eager spirit. Note, 1. Very holy men may differ much from each other in their natural temper and in other things that result from it. 2. God's work may be done, well done, and successfully, and yet different methods taken in the doing of it, which is a good reason why we should neither arraign the management of others nor make our own a standard. There are diversities of operation, but the same Spirit.

V. He fairly reasoned the case with them, and showed them the evil of what they did. The regular way of reforming men's lives is to endeavour, in the first place, to convince their consciences. Several things he offered to their consideration, which are so pertinent and just that it appeared he had consulted with himself. He lays it before them, 1. That those whom they oppressed were their brethren: *You exact every one of his brother*. It was bad enough to oppress strangers, but much worse to oppress their poor brethren, from whom the divine law did not allow them to *take any usury*, Deu. 23:19, 20. 2. That they were but lately redeemed *out of the hand of the heathen*. The body of the people were so by the wonderful providence of God; some particular persons among them were so, who, besides their share in the general captivity, were in servitude to heathen masters, and ransomed at the charge of Nehemiah and other pious and well-disposed persons. "Now," says he, "have we taken all this pains to get their liberty out of the hands of the heathen, and shall their own rulers enslave them? What an absurd thing is this! Must we be at the same trouble and expense to redeem them from you as we were to redeem them from Babylon?" v. 8. Those whom God by his grace has made free ought not to be again brought under *a yoke of bondage*, Gal. 5:1; 1 Co. 7:23. 3. That it was a great sin thus to oppress the poor (v. 9): *"It is not good that you do; though you get money by it, you contract guilt by it, and ought you not to walk in the fear of God? Certainly you ought, for you profess religion, and relation to him; and, if you do walk in the fear of God, you will not be either covetous of worldly gain or cruel towards your brethren."* Those that walk in the

fear of God will not dare to do a wicked thing, Job 31:13, 14, 23. 4. That it was a great scandal, and a reproach to their profession. "Consider *the reproach of the heathen our enemies*, enemies to us, to our God, and to our holy religion. They will be glad of any occasion to speak against us, and this will give them great occasion; they will say, These Jews, that profess so much devotion to God, see how barbarous they are one to another." Note, (1.) All that profess religion should be very careful that they do nothing to expose themselves to the reproach of those that are without, lest religion be wounded through their sides. (2.) Nothing exposes religion more to the reproach of its enemies than the worldliness and hard-heartedness of the professors of it. 5. That he himself had set them a better example (v. 10), which he enlarges upon afterwards, v. 14, etc. Those that rigorously insist upon their right themselves will with a very ill grace persuade others to recede from theirs.

VI. He earnestly pressed them not only not to make their poor neighbours any more such hard bargains, but to restore that which they had got into their hands, v. 11. See how familiarly he speaks to them: *Let us leave off this usury*, putting himself in, as becomes reprovers, though far from being any way guilty of the crime. See how earnestly, and yet humbly, he persuades them: *I pray you leave off*; and *I pray you restore*. Though he had authority to command, yet, *for love's sake, he rather beseeches*. See how particularly he presses them to be kind to the poor, to give them up their mortgages, put them again in possession of their estates, remit the interest, and give them time to pay in the principal. He urged them to their loss, yet, urging them to their duty, it would be, at length, to their advantage. What we charitably forgive will be remembered and recompensed, as well as what we charitably give.

VII. He laid them under all the obligations possible to do what he pressed them to. 1. He got a promise from them (v. 12): *We will restore them*. 2. He sent for the priests to give them their oath that they would perform this promise; now that their convictions were strong, and they seemed resolved, he would keep them to it. 3. He bound them by a solemn curse or execration, hoping that would strike some awe upon them: *So let God shake out every man that performeth not this promise*, v. 13. This was a threatening that he would certainly do so, to which the people said *Amen*, as to those curses at Mount Ebal (Deu. 27), that their throats might be cut with their own tongues if they should falsify their engagement, and that by the dread of that they might be kept to their promise. With this *Amen* the people *praised the Lord*; so far were they from promising with regret that they promised with all possible expressions of joy and thankfulness. Thus David, when he took God's vows upon him, *sang and gave praise*, Ps. 56:12. This cheerfulness in promising was well, but that which follows was better: *They did according to this promise*, and adhered to what they had done, not as their ancestors in a like case, who re-enslaved those whom a little before they had released, Jer. 34:10, 11. Good promises are good things, but good performances are all in all.

Verses 14-19

Nehemiah had mentioned his own practice, as an inducement to the nobles not to burden the poor, no, not with just demands; here he relates more particularly what his practice was, not in pride or vain-glory, nor to pass a compliment upon himself, but as an inducement both to his successors and to the inferior magistrates to be as tender as might be of the people's ease.

I. He intimates what had been the way of his predecessors, v. 15. He does not name them, because what he had to say of them was not to their honour, and in such a case it is good to spare names; but the people knew how chargeable they had been, and

how dearly the country paid for all the benefit of their government. The government allowed them *forty shekels of silver*, which was nearly five pounds (so much a day, it is probable); but, besides that, they obliged the people to furnish them with *bread and wine*, which they claimed as perquisites of their office; and not only so, but they suffered their servants to squeeze the people, and to get all they could out of them. Note, 1. It is no new thing for those who are in public places to seek themselves more than the public welfare, any, and to serve themselves by the public loss. 2. Masters must be accountable for all the acts of fraud and injustice, violence and oppression, which they connive at in their servants.

II. He tells us what had been his own way.

1. In general, he had not done as the former governors did; he would not, he durst not, *because of the fear of God*. He had an awe of God's majesty and a dread of his wrath. And, (1.) The fear of God restrained him from oppressing the people. Those that truly fear God will not dare to do any thing cruel or unjust. (2.) It was purely that which restrained him. He was thus generous, not that he might have praise of men, or serve a turn by his interest in the people, but purely for conscience' sake, because of the fear of God. This will not only be a powerful, but an acceptable principle both of justice and charity. What a good hand his predecessors made of their place appeared by the estates they raised; but Nehemiah, for his part, got nothing, except the satisfaction of doing good: *Neither bought we any land*, v. 16. Say not then that he was a bad husband, but that he was a good governor, who aimed not to feather his own nest. Let us *remember the words of the Lord*, how he said, *It is more blessed to give than to receive*, Acts 20:35.

2. More particularly, observe here, (1.) How little Nehemiah received of what he might have required. He did the work of the governor, but he did not *eat the bread of the governor* (v. 14), did not require it, v. 18. So far was he from extorting more than his due that he never demanded that, but lived upon what he had got in the king of Persia's court and his own estate in Judea: the reason he gives for this piece of self-denial is, *Because the bondage was heavy upon the people*. He might have used the common excuse for rigour in such cases, that it would be a wrong to his successors not to demand his dues; but let them look to themselves: he considered the afflicted state of the Jews, and, while they groaned under so much hardship, he could not find it in his heart to add to their burden, but would rather lessen his own estate than ruin them. note, In our demands we must consider not only the justice of them, but the ability of those on whom we make them; where there is nothing to be had we know who loses his right. (2.) How much he gave which he might have withheld. [1.] His servants' work, v. 16. The servants of princes think themselves excused from labour; but Nehemiah's servants, by his order no doubt, were *all gathered to the work*. Those that have many servants should contrive how they may do good with them and keep them well employed. [2.] His own meat, v. 17, 18. He kept a very good table, not on certain days, but constantly; he had many honourable guests, at least 150 of his own countrymen, persons of the first rank, besides strangers that came to him upon business; and he had plentiful provisions for his guests, beef, and mutton, and fowl, and all sorts of wine. Let those in public places remember that they were preferred to do good, not to enrich themselves; and let people in humbler stations learn to *use hospitality one to another without grudging*, 1 Pt. 4:9.

III. He concludes with a prayer (v. 19): *Think upon me, my God, for good*. 1. Nehemiah here mentions what he had *done for*

this people, not in pride, as boasting of himself, nor in passion, as upbraiding them, nor does it appear that he had occasion to do it in his own vindication, as Paul had to relate his like self-denying tenderness towards the Corinthians, but to shame the rulers out of their oppressions; let them learn of him to be neither greedy in their demands nor paltry in their expenses, and then they would have the credit and comfort of their liberality, as he had. 2. He mentions it to God in prayer, not as if he thought he had hereby merited any favour from God, as a debt, but to show that he looked not for any recompence of his generosity from men, but depended upon God only to make up to him what he had lost and laid out for his honour; and he reckoned the favour of God reward enough. "If God do but *think upon me for good*, I have enough." His thoughts to us-ward are our happiness, Ps. 40:5. He refers it to God to recompense him in such a manner as he pleased. "If men forget me, let my God think on me, and I desire no more."

Chapter 6

The cries of oppressed poverty being stilled, we are now to enquire how the building of the wall goes forward, and in this chapter we find it carried on with vigour and finished with joy, notwithstanding the restless attempts of the gates of hell to hinder it. How the Jews' enemies were baffled in their design to put a stop to it by force we read before, ch. 4. Here we find how their endeavours to drive Nehemiah off from it were frustrated. I. When they courted him to an interview, with design to do him a mischief, he would not stir (v. 1-4). II. When they would have made him believe his undertaking was represented as seditious and treasonable, he regarded not the insinuation (v. 5-9). III. When they hired pretended prophets to advise him to retire into the temple for his own safety, still he kept his ground (v. 10-14). IV. Notwithstanding the secret correspondence that was kept up between them and some false and treacherous Jews, the work was finished in a short time (v. 15-19). Such as these were the struggles between the church and its enemies. But great is God's cause and it will be prosperous and victorious.

Verses 1-9

Two plots upon Nehemiah we have here an account of, how cunningly they were laid by his enemies and how happily frustrated by God's good providence and his prudence.

I. A plot to trepan him into a snare. The enemies had an account of the good forwardness the work was in, that all the breaches of the wall were made up, so that they considered it as good as done, though at that time the *doors of the gates* were off the hinges (v. 1); they must therefore now or never, by one bold stroke, take off Nehemiah. They heard how well guarded he was, so that there was no attacking him upon the spot; they will therefore try by all the arts of wheedling to get him among them. Observe, 1. With what hellish subtlety they courted him to meet them, not in any city, lest that should excite a suspicion that they intended to secure him, but in a village in the lot of Benjamin: "*Come, let us meet together* to consult about the common interests of our provinces." Or they would have him think that they coveted his friendship, and would be glad to be better acquainted with him, in order to a good understanding between them and the settling of a good correspondence. *But they thought to do him a mischief.* It is probable that he had some secret intelligence given him that they designed to imprison or murder him; or he knew them so well that, without breach of charity, he concluded they aimed at his life, and therefore, when they *spoke fair, he believed them not.* 2. See with what heavenly wisdom he declined the motion. His *God did instruct him* to give them that prudent answer by messengers of his own: "*I am doing a great work, am very busy, and am loth to let the work stand still while I leave it to come down to you,*" v. 3. His care was that the work might not cease; he knew it would if he left it ever so little; and *why should it cease while I come down to you?* He says nothing of his jealousies, nor reproaches them for their treacherous design, but gives them a good reason and one of the true reasons why he would not come. Compliment must always give way to business. Let those that are tempted to idle merry meetings by their vain companions thus answer the temptation, "We have work to do, and must not neglect it." Four times they attacked him with the same sollicitation, and he as often returned the same answer, which, we may suppose, was very vexatious to them; for really it was the ceasing of the work that they aimed at, and it would make them despair of breaking the undertaking to see the undertaker so intent upon it. *I*

answered them (says he) *after the same manner*, v. 4. Note, We must never suffer ourselves to be overcome by the greatest importunity to do any thing sinful or imprudent; but, when we are attacked with the same temptation, must still resist it with the same reason and resolution.

II. A plot to terrify him from his work. Could they but drive him off, the work would cease of course. This therefore Sanballat attempts, but in vain. 1. he endeavours to possess Nehemiah with an apprehension that his undertaking to build the walls of Jerusalem was generally represented as factious and seditious, and would be resented accordingly at court, v. 5-7. The best men, even in their most innocent and excellent performances, have lain under this imputation. This is written to him in *an open letter*, as a thing generally known and talked of, that it was reported among the nations, and Gashmu will aver it for truth, that Nehemiah was aiming to make himself king and to shake off the Persian yoke. Note, It is common for that which is the sense only of the malicious to be falsely represented by them as the sense of the many. Now Sanballat pretends to inform Nehemiah of this as a friend, that he might hasten to court to clear himself, or stay his proceedings, for fear they should be thus misconstrued; at least, upon this surmise, he urges him to give him the meeting—*"Let us take counsel together* how to quell the report," hoping by this means either to take him off, or at least to take him off from his business. Thus were his words *softer than oil*, and yet *war was in his heart*, and he hoped, like Judas, to kiss and kill. But surely in vain is the net spread in the sight of any bird. Nehemiah was soon aware what they aimed at, to *weaken their hands from the work* (v. 9), and therefore not only denied that such things were true, but that they were reported; he was better known than to be thus suspected. 2. Thus he escaped the snare and kept his ground, nor would he be frightened by winds and clouds from sowing and reaping. Suppose it was thus reported, we must never omit known duty merely for fear it should be misconstrued; but, while we keep a good conscience, let us trust God with our good name. But indeed it was not thus reported. God's people, though sufficiently loaded with reproach, yet are not really so low in reputation as some would have them thought to be.

In the midst of his complaint of their malice, in endeavouring to frighten him, and so weaken his hands, he lifts up his heart to Heaven in this short prayer: *Now therefore, O God! strengthen my hands*. It is the great support and relief of good people that in all their straits and difficulties they have a good God to go to, from whom, by faith and prayer, they may fetch in grace to silence their fears and *strengthen their hands* when their enemies are endeavouring to fill them with fears and weaken their hands. When, in our Christian work and warfare, we are entering upon any particular services or conflicts, this is a good prayer for us to put up: "I have such a duty to do, such a temptation to grapple with; *now therefore, O God! strengthen my hands*." Some read it, not as a prayer, but as a holy resolution (for *O God* is supplied in our translation): *Now therefore I will strengthen my hands*. Note, Christian fortitude will be sharpened by opposition. Every temptation to draw us from duty should quicken us so much the more to duty.

Verses 10-14

The Jews' enemies leave no stone unturned, no way untried, to take Nehemiah off from building the wall about Jerusalem. In order to this they had tried to fetch him into the country to them, but in vain; now they try to drive him into the temple for his own safety; let him be any where but at his work. Observing him to be a cautious man, they will endeavour to gain their point

by making him cowardly. Observe,

I. How basely the enemies managed this temptation.

1. That which they designed was to bring Nehemiah to do a foolish thing, that they might laugh at him, and insult over him for doing it, and so lessen his interest and influence (v. 13): *That I should be afraid*, and so they might have *matter for an evil report*, and *might reproach me*. This was indeed doing the devil's work, who is men's tempter that he may be their accuser, draws men to sin that he may glory in their shame. The greatest mischief our enemies can do us is to frighten us from our duty and bring us to do what is sinful.

2. The tools they made use of were a pretended prophet and prophetess, whom they hired to persuade Nehemiah to quit his work and retire for his own safety. The pretended prophet was Shemaiah, of whom it is said that he was *shut up* in his own house, either under pretence of retirement for meditation and to consult the mind of God or to give Nehemiah a sign in like manner to make himself a recluse. It should seem, Nehemiah had a value for him, for he went to his house to consult him, v. 10. Other prophets there were, and one prophetess, Noadiah (v. 14), that were in the interest of the Jews' enemies, pensioners to them and traitors to their country. Whether they pretended to inspiration does not appear; they do not say, *Thus saith the Lord*, as the false prophets of old did; if not so, yet they would be thought to excel in divine knowledge, and human prudence, and to have uncommon measures of insight and foresight, and were therefore consulted in difficult cases, as prophets had been. These the enemies feed to be of counsel for them. Let us hence take occasion to lament, (1.) The wickedness of such bad men as these prophets, that ever any should be so perfidious as to betray the cause of God and their country even under the pretence of communion with God and concern for their country. (2.) The unhappiness of such good men as Nehemiah, who are in danger of being imposed upon by such cheats, and to whom no temptation comes with more force than that which comes under a colour of religion, of revelation and devotion, and is brought by the hand of prophets.

3. The pretence was plausible. These prophets suggested to Nehemiah that the enemies would come and slay him, *in the night* they would slay him, which he had reason enough to believe was true; they would, if they could, if they durst. They pretended to be much concerned for his safety. The people would be all undone if any harm should come to him; and therefore they very gravely advised him to hide himself in the temple till the danger was over; that was a strong and sacred place, where he would be under the special protection of Heaven, Ps. 27:5. If Nehemiah had been prevailed upon to do this, immediately the people would both have left off their work and thrown down their arms, and every one would have shifted for his own safety; and then the enemies might easily, and without opposition, have demolished the works, broken down the wall again, and so gained their point. Though self-preservation is a fundamental principle of the law of nature, yet that is not always the best and wisest counsel which pretends to go upon that principle.

II. See how bravely Nehemiah vanquished this temptation, and came off a conqueror.

1. He immediately resolved not to yield to it, v. 11. See here, (1.) What his reasonings are: *"Should such a man as I flee? Shall I desert God's work, or discourage my own workmen whom I have employed and encouraged? Shall I be over-credulous of report, and over-solicitous about my own life? I that am the governor, on whom so many eyes are, both of friends and foes?"*

Another might flee, but not I. *Who is there that being as I am*, in my post of honour, and power, and trust, would go into the temple, and lurk there, when business is to be done, yea, though it were to save his life?" Note, When we are tempted to sin we should remember who and what we are, that we may not do any thing unbecoming us, and the profession we make. *It is not for kings, O Lemuel!* Prov. 31:4. (2.) What was the result of his reasonings. He is at a point: "I will not go in. I will rather die at my work than live in an inglorious retreat from it." Note, Holy courage and magnanimity will engage us, whatever it cost us, never to *decline a good work*, nor ever to *do a bad one*.

2. He was immediately aware of what was the rise of it (v. 12): "*I perceived that God had not sent him*, that he gave this advice, not by any divine direction, ordinary or extraordinary, but with a design against me." The wickedness of such mercenary wretches will sooner or later be brought to light. Two things Nehemiah says he dreaded in that which he was advised to:—(1.) Offending God: *That I should be afraid, and do so, and sin*. Note, Sin is that which above any thing we should dread; and a good preservative it is against sin to be afraid of nothing but sin. (2.) Shaming himself: *That they might reproach me*. Note, Next to the sinfulness of sin we should dread the scandalousness of it.

3. He humbly begs of God to reckon with them for their base designs upon him (v. 14): *My God, think thou upon Tobiah*, and the rest of them, *according to their works*. As, when he had mentioned his own good services, he did not covetously or ambitiously prescribe to God what reward he should give him, but modestly prayed, *Think upon me, my God* (ch. 5:19), so here he does not revengefully imprecate any particular judgment upon his enemies, but refers the matter to God. "Thou knowest their hearts, and art the avenger of falsehood and wrong; take cognizance of this cause; judge between me and them, and take what way and time thou mayest please to call them to an account for it." Note, Whatever injuries are done us we must not avenge ourselves, but commit our cause to him that judgeth righteously.

Verses 15-19

Nehemiah is here finishing the wall of Jerusalem, and yet still has trouble created him by his enemies.

I. Tobiah, and the other adversaries of the Jews, had the mortification to see the wall built up, notwithstanding all their attempts to hinder it. The wall was begun and finished *in fifty-two days*, and yet we have reason to believe they rested on the sabbaths, v. 15. Many were employed, and there was room for them; what they did they did cheerfully, and minded their business because they loved it. The threats of their enemies, which were intended to weaken them, it is likely, quickened them to go on with their work the more vigorously, that they might get it done before the enemy came. Thus *out of the eater came forth meat*. See what a great deal of work may be done in a little time if we would set about it in earnest and keep close to it. When the enemies heard that the wall was finished before they thought it was well begun, and, when they doubted not but to put a stop to it, they were *much cast down in their own eyes*, v. 16. 1. They were ashamed of their own confidence that they should *cause the work to cease*; they were crest-fallen upon the disappointment. 2. They envied the prosperity and success of the Jews, grieved to see the walls of Jerusalem built, while, it may be, the kings of Persia had not permitted them thus to fortify the cities of Samaria. When Cain envied his brother his *countenance fell*, Gen. 4:5. 3. They despaired of ever doing them the mischief they designed them, of bringing them down and making a prey of them; and well they might, for they perceived, by

the wonderful success, *that the work was wrought of God*. Even these heathens had so much sense as, [1.] To see a special providence of God conversant about the affairs of the church when they did remarkably prosper. They *said among the heathen, The Lord has done great things for them*; it is his doing, Ps. 126:2. God fighteth for Israel and worketh with them. [2.] To believe that God's work would be perfect. When they perceived that the *work was of God* they expected no other than that it would go on and prosper. [3.] To conclude that, if it were of God, it was to no purpose to think of opposing it; it would certainly prevail and be victorious.

II. Nehemiah had the vexation, notwithstanding this, to see some of his own people treacherously corresponding with Tobiah and serving his interest; and a great grief and discouragement, no doubt, it was to him. 1. Even of the nobles of Judah there were those who had so little sense of honour and their country's good as to communicate with Tobiah by letter, v. 17. They wrote with all the freedom and familiarity of friends to him, and welcomed his letters to them. Could nobles do a thing so mean? Nobles of Judah so wicked a thing? It seems great men are not always wise, not always honest. 2. Many in Judah were in a strict but secret confederacy with him to advance the interest of his country, though it would certainly be the ruin of their own. They were *sworn unto him*, not as their prince, but as their friend and ally, because both he and his son had married daughters of Israel, v. 18. See the mischief of marrying with strangers; for one heathen that was converted by it ten Jews were perverted. When once they became akin to Tobiah they soon became sworn to him. A sinful love leads to a sinful league. 3. They had the impudence to court Nehemiah himself into a friendship with him: "*They reported his good deeds before me, represented him as an intelligent gentleman and well worthy my acquaintance, an honest gentleman and one that I might confide in.*" We are indeed required to *speak ill of no man*, but never to speak well of bad men. *Those that forsake the law praise the wicked*, Prov. 28:4. 4. They were so false as to betray Nehemiah's counsels to him; they uttered Nehemiah's words to him, perverting them, no doubt, and putting false constructions upon them, which furnished Tobiah with matter for letters to put him in fear and so drive him from his work and discourage him in it. Thus were all their thoughts against him for evil, yet God thought upon him for good.

Chapter 7

The success of one good design for God and our generation should encourage us to proceed and form some other; Nehemiah did so, having fortified Jerusalem with gates and walls, his next care is, I. To see the city well kept (v. 1-4). II. To see it well peopled, in order to which he here reviews and calls over the register of the children of the captivity, the families that returned at first, and records it (v. 5-73). It is the same, in effect, with that which we had, Ezra 2. What use he made of it we shall find afterwards, when he brought one of ten to live in Jerusalem, 11:1.

Verses 1-4

God saith concerning his church (Isa. 62:6), *I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem!* This is Nehemiah's care here; for dead walls, without living watchmen, are but a poor defence to a city.

I. He appointed *the porters, singers, and Levites*, in their places to their work. This is meant of their work in general, which was to attend the temple service; it had been neglected in some degree, but now was revived. God's worship is the defence of a place, and his ministers, when they mind their duty, are watchmen on the walls. Or, in particular, he ordered them to be ready against the wall was to be dedicated, that they might perform that service in an orderly and solemn manner; and the dedication of it was its strength. That is likely to be beneficial to us which is devoted to God.

II. He appointed two governors or consuls, to whom he committed the care of the city, and gave them in charge to provide for the public peace and safety. Hanani, his brother, who came to him with the tidings of the desolations of Jerusalem, was one, a man of approved integrity and affection to his country; the other was Hananiah, who had been ruler of the palace: for he that has approved himself faithful in less shall be entrusted with more. Of this Hananiah it is said that he was a *faithful man and one that feared God above many*, v. 2. Note, 1. Among those who fear God truly there are some who fear him greatly, and excel others in the expressions and instances of that fear; and they are worthy a double portion of that honour which is due to those that *fear the Lord*, Ps. 15:4. There were many in Jerusalem that feared God, but this good man was more eminent for religion and serious godliness than any. 2. Those that fear God must evidence it by their being faithful to all men and universally conscientious. 3. God's Jerusalem is then likely to flourish when those rule in it, and have charge of it, who excel in virtue, and are eminent both for godliness and honesty. It is supposed, by some, that Nehemiah was now about to return to the Persian court to have his commission renewed, and that he left these two worthy men in charge with the affairs of the city in his absence. Good governors, when and where they cannot act themselves, must be very careful whom they depute.

III. He gave orders about the shutting of the gates and the guarding of the walls, v. 3, 4. See here, 1. What the present state of Jerusalem was. The city, in compass, was large and great. The walls enclosed the same ground as formerly; but much of it lay waste, for the houses were not built, few at least in comparison with what had been; so that Nehemiah walled the city in faith, and with an eye to that promise of the replenishing of it which God had lately made by the prophet, Zec. 8:3, etc. Though the people were now few, he believed they would be multiplied, and therefore built the walls so as to make room for them; had he not depended upon this he might have thought walls without a city as great a reproach as a city without walls. 2. What was the

care of Nehemiah for it. He ordered the rulers of the city themselves, (1.) To stand by, and see the city-gates shut up and barred every night; for in vain had they a wall if they were careless of their gates. (2.) To take care that they should not be opened in the morning till they could see that all was clear and quiet. (3.) To set sentinels upon the walls, or elsewhere, at convenient distances, who should, in case of the approach of the enemy, give timely notice to the city of the danger; and, as it came to their turn to watch, they must post themselves *over against their own houses*, because of them, it might be presumed, they would be in a particular manner careful. The public safety depends upon every one's particular care to guard himself and his own family against sin, that common enemy. It is every one's interest to watch, but many understand not their own interest; it is therefore incumbent upon magistrates to appoint watches. And as this people had lately found God with them in their building (else they would have built in vain), so now that the wall was built, no doubt, they were made sensible that *except the Lord kept the city the watchman waked but in vain*, Ps. 127:1.

Verses 5-73

We have here another good project of Nehemiah's; for wise and zealous men will be always contriving something or other for the glory of God and the edification of his church. He knew very well that the safety of a city, under God, depends more upon the number and valour of the inhabitants than upon the height or strength of its walls; and therefore, observing that the people were few that dwelt in it, he thought fit to take an account of the people, that he might find what families had formerly had their settlement in Jerusalem, but were now removed into the country, that he might bring them back, and what families could in any other way be influenced by their religion, or by their business, to come and rebuild the houses in Jerusalem and dwell in them. So little reason have we to wish that we may be placed alone in the earth, or in Jerusalem itself, that much of our safety and comfort depends upon our neighbours and friends; the more the stronger, the more the merrier. It is the wisdom of the governors of a nation to keep the balance even between the city and country, that the metropolis be not so extravagantly large as to drain and impoverish the country, nor yet so weak as not to be able to protect it. Now observe,

I. Whence this good design of Nehemiah's came. He owns, *My God put it into my heart*, v. 5. Note, Whatever good motion is in our minds, either prudent or pious, we must acknowledge it to come from God. It was he that *put it into our hearts*; for every good gift and every good work are from above. He gives knowledge; he gives grace; all is of him, and therefore all must be to him. What is done by human prudence must be ascribed to the direction of divine Providence; he that teaches the husbandman his discretion (Isa. 28:26) teaches the statesman his.

II. What method he took in prosecution of it.

1. He called the rulers together, and the people, that he might have an account of the present state of their families—their number and strength, and where they were settled. It is probable that when he summoned them to come together he ordered them to bring such an account along with them out of their several districts. And I doubt they were not so many but that it might be soon done.

2. He reviewed the old *register of the genealogy of those who came up at the first*, and compared the present accounts with that; and here we have the repetition of that out of Ezra 2. The title is the same here (v. 6, 7) as there (v. 1, 2): *These are the*

children of the province, etc. Two things are here repeated and recorded a second time from thence—the names and numbers of their several families, and their oblations to the service of the temple. The repetition of these accounts may intimate to us the delight which the great God is pleased to take in the persons, families, and services of his spiritual Israel, and the particular notice he takes of them. He knows those that are his, knows them all, knows them by name, has his eye on the register of those children of the captivity, and does all according to the ancient counsel of his will concerning them.

(1.) Here is an account of the heads of the several families that first came up, v. 6–69. As to this, [1.] Though it seem of little use to us now, yet then it was of great use, to compare what they had been with what they now were. We may suppose they were much increased by this time; but it would do well for them to remember their small beginnings, that they might acknowledge God in multiplying their families and building them up. By this means likewise their genealogies would be preserved, and the distinction of their families kept up, till the Messiah should come, and then an end be put to all their genealogies, which were preserved for his sake, but afterwards were endless. But, [2.] There are many differences in the numbers between this catalogue and that in Ezra. Most of them indeed are exactly the same, and some others within a very few under or over (one or two perhaps); and therefore I cannot think, as some do, that that was the number of these families at their first coming and this as they were now, which was at least forty years after (some make it much more); for we cannot suppose so many families to be not at all, or but little, altered in their numbers in all that time; therefore what differences there are we may suppose to arise either from the mistakes of transcribers, which easily happen in numbers, or from the diversity of the copies from which they were taken. Or perhaps one was the account of them when they set out from Babylon with Zerubbabel, the other when they came to Jerusalem. The sum totals are all just the same there and here, except of the singing-men and singing-women, which there are 200, here 245. These were not of such importance as that they should keep any strict account of them.

(2.) Here is an account of the offerings which were given towards the work of God, v. 70, etc. This differs much from that in Ezra 2:68, 69, and it may be questioned whether it refers to the same contribution; here the *tirshatha*, or chief governor, who there was not mentioned, begins the offering; and the single sum mentioned there exceeds all those here put together; yet it is probable that it was the same, but that followed one copy of the lists, this another; for the last verse is the same here that it was Ezra 2:70, adding ch. 3:1. Blessed be God that our faith and hope are not built upon the niceties of names and numbers, genealogy and chronology, but on the great things of the law and gospel. Whatever is given to the work of God, he is not unrighteous to forget it; nor shall even a cup of cold water, wherewith he is honoured, go without its reward

Chapter 8

Ezra came up out of Babylon thirteen years before Nehemiah came, yet we have here a piece of good work which he did, that might have been done before, but was not done till Nehemiah came, who, though he was not such a scholar nor such a divine as Ezra, nor such a scribe in the law of his God, yet was a man of a more lively active spirit. His zeal set Ezra's learning on work, and then great things were done, as we find here, where we have, I. The public and solemn reading and expounding of the law (v. 1-8). II. The joy which the people were ordered to express upon that occasion (v. 9-12). III. The solemn keeping of the feast of tabernacles according to the law (v. 13-18).

Verses 1-8

We have here an account of a solemn religious assembly, and the good work that was done in that assembly, to the honour of God and the edification of the church.

I. The time of it was the *first day of the seventh month*, v. 2. That was the day of the *feast of trumpets*, which is called a *sabbath*, and on which they were to have a *holy convocation*, Lev. 23:24; Num. 29:1. But that was not all: it was one that day that the altar was set up, and they began to offer their burnt-offerings after their return out of captivity, a recent mercy in the memory of many then living; in a thankful remembrance of that, it is likely, they had kept this feast ever since with more than ordinary solemnity. Divine favours which are fresh in mind, and which we ourselves have been witnesses of, should be, and usually are, most affecting.

II. The place was in the *street that was before the water-gate* (v. 1), a spacious broad street, able to contain so great a multitude, which the court of the temple was not; for probably it was not now built nearly so large as it had been in Solomon's time. Sacrifices were to be offered only at the door of the temple, but praying, and praising, and preaching, were, and are, services of religion as acceptably performed in one place as in another. When this congregation thus met in the street of the city no doubt God was with them.

III. The persons that met were all the people, who were not compelled to come, but voluntarily gathered themselves together by common agreement, as one man: not only men came, but women and children, even as many as were capable of understanding what they heard. Masters of families should bring their families with them to the public worship of God. Women and children have souls to save, and are therefore concerned to acquaint themselves with the word of God and attend on the means of knowledge and grace. Little ones, as they come to the exercise of reason, must be trained up in the exercises of religion.

IV. The master of this assembly was Ezra the priest; he presided in this service. None so fit to expound and preach as he who was such a ready scribe in the law of his God. 1. His call to the service was very clear; for being in office as a priest, and qualified as a scribe, the *people spoke to him to bring the book of the law* and read it to them, v. 1. God gave him ability and authority, and then the people gave him opportunity and invitation. Knowledge is spiritual alms, which those that are able should give to every one that needs, to every one that asks. 2. His post was very convenient. He stood in a pulpit or tower of

wood, *which they made for the word* (so it is in the original), *for the preaching of the word*, that what he said might be the more gracefully delivered and the better heard, and that the eyes of the hearers might be upon him, which would engage their attention, as Lu. 4:20. 3. He had several assistants. Some of these stood with him (v. 4), six on his right hand and seven on his left: either his pulpit was so contrived as to hold them all in a row, as in a gallery (but then it would scarcely have been called a *tower*), or they had desks a degree lower. Some think, that he appointed them to read when he was weary; at least his taking them as assessors with him put an honour upon them before the people, in order to their being employed in the same service another time. Others who are mentioned (v. 7) seem to have been employed at the same time in other places near at hand, to read and expound to those who could not come within hearing of Ezra. Of these also there were thirteen priests, whose lips were to keep knowledge, Mal. 2:7. It is a great mercy to a people thus to be furnished with ministers that are apt to teach. Happy was Ezra in having such assistants as these, and happy were they in having such a guide as Ezra.

V. The religious exercises performed in this assembly were not ceremonial, but moral, praying and preaching. Ezra, as president of the assembly, was, 1. The people's mouth to God, and they affectionately joined with him, v. 6. He blessed the Lord as the great God, gave honour to him by praising his perfections and praying for his favour; and the people, in token of their concurrence with him both in prayers and praises, said, *Amen, Amen, lifted up their hands* in token of their desire being towards God and all their expectations from him, and *bowed their heads* in token of their reverence of him and subjection to him. Thus must we adore God, and address ourselves to him, when we are going to read and hear the word of God, as those that see God in his word very great and very good. 2. God's mouth to the people, and they attentively hearkened to him. This was the chief business of the solemnity, and observe, (1.) *Ezra brought the law before the congregation*, v. 2. He had taken care to provide himself with the best and most correct copies of the law; and what he had laid up for his own use and satisfaction he here brought forth, as a good householder out of his treasury, for the benefit of the church. Observe, [1.] The book of the law is not to be confined to the scribes' studies, but to be brought before the congregation and read to them in their own language. [2.] Ministers, when they go to the pulpit, should take their Bibles with them; Ezra did so; thence they must fetch their knowledge, and according to that rule they must speak and must show that they do so. See 2 Chr. 17:9. (2.) He opened the book with great reverence and solemnity, *in the sight of all the people*, v. 5. He brought it forth with a sense of the great mercy of God to them in giving them that book; he opened it with a sense of his mercy to them in giving them leave to read it, that it was not a spring shut up and a fountain sealed. The *taking of the books, and the opening of the seals*, we find celebrated with joy and praise, Rev. 5:9. Let us learn to address ourselves to the services of religion with solemn stops and pauses, and not to go about them rashly; let us consider what we are doing when we take God's book into our hands, and open it, and so also when we bow our knees in prayer; and what we do let us do deliberately, Eccl. 5:1. (3.) He and others read in the book of the law, *from morning till noon* (v. 3), and they read *distinctly*, v. 8. Reading the scriptures in religious assemblies is an ordinance of God, whereby he is honoured and his church edified. And, upon special occasions, we must be willing to attend for many hours together on the reading and expounding of the word of God: those mentioned here were thus employed for six hours. Let those that read and preach the word learn also to deliver themselves distinctly, as those who understand what

they say and are affected with it themselves, and who desire that those they speak to may understand it, retain it, and be affected with it likewise. *It is a snare for a man to devour that which is holy.* (4.) What they read they expounded, showed the intent and meaning of it, and what use was to be made of it; they gave the sense in other words, that they might *cause the people to understand the reading*, v. 7, 8. Note, [1.] It is requisite that those who hear the word should understand it, else it is to them but an empty sound of words, Mt. 24:15. [2.] It is therefore required of those who are teachers by office that they explain the word and give the sense of it. *Understandest thou what thou readest?* and, *Have you understood all these things?* are good questions to be put to the hearers; but, *How should we except someone guide us?* is as proper a question for them to put to their teachers, Acts 8:30, 31. Reading is good, and preaching good, but expounding brings the reading and the preaching together, and thus makes the reading the more intelligible and the preaching the more convincing. (5.) The people conducted themselves very properly when the word was read and opened to them. [1.] With great reverence. When Ezra opened the book *all the people stood up* (v. 5), thereby showing respect both to Ezra and to the word he was about to read. It becomes servants to stand when their master speaks to them, in honour to their master and to show a readiness to do as they are bidden. [2.] With great fixedness and composedness. They *stood in their place* (v. 7); several ministers were reading and expounding at some distance from each other, and every one of the people kept his post, did not go to hear first one and then another, to make remarks upon them, but stood in his place, that he might neither give disturbance to another nor receive any disturbance himself. [3.] With great attention and a close application of mind: *The ears of all the people were unto the book of the law* (v. 3), were even chained to it; they heard readily, and minded every word. The word of God commands attention and deserves it. If through carelessness we let much slip in hearing, there is danger that through forgetfulness we shall let all slip after hearing.

Verses 9-12

We may here observe,

I. How the people were wounded with the words of the law that were read to them. The law works death, and speaks terror, shows men their sins, and their misery and danger because of sin, and thunders a curse against every one that continues not in every part of his duty. Therefore when they heard it they *all wept* (v. 9): it was a good sign that their hearts were tender, like Josiah's when he heard the words of the law. They wept to think how they had offended God, and exposed themselves, by their many violations of the law; when some wept all wept, for they all saw themselves guilty before God.

II. How they were healed and comforted with the words of peace that were spoken to them. It was well that they were so much affected with the word of God, and received the impressions of it; but they must not yield unduly to their mourning, especially at this time, because the day was holy to the Lord; it was one of the solemn feasts, on which it was their duty to rejoice; and even sorrow for sin must not hinder our joy in God, but rather lead us to it and prepare us for it.

1. The masters of the assembly endeavoured to pacify them and encourage them. Now Nehemiah is brought in, and not before, in this chapter; he took notice of the people's weeping. Ezra was pleased to see them so affected with the word, but Nehemiah observed to him, and Ezra concurred in the thought, that it was now unseasonable. This day was holy (it is called *a sabbath*, Lev. 23:24), and therefore was to be celebrated with joy and praise, not as if it were *a day to afflict their souls*. (1.) They

forbade the people to *mourn and weep* (v. 9); *Be not sorry* (v. 10); *hold your peace, neither be you grieved*, v. 11. Every thing is beautiful in its season; as we must not be merry when *God calls to mourning*, so we must not frighten and afflict ourselves when God gives us occasion to rejoice. Even sorrow for sin must not grow so excessive as to hinder our joy in God and our cheerfulness in his service. (2.) They commanded them to testify their joy, to put *on the garments of praise instead of the spirit of heaviness*. They allowed them, in token of their joy, to feast themselves, to eat and drink better than on other days, *to eat the fat and drink the sweet*; but then it must be, [1.] With charity to the poor: "*Send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared that your abundance may supply their want, that they may rejoice with you and their loins may bless you.*" Christ directs those that make feasts to invite their poor neighbours, Lu. 14:13. But it is especially the duty of a religious feast, as well as of a religious fast, to *draw out the soul to the hungry*, Isa. 58:7, 10. God's bounty should make us bountiful. Many will eat the fat and drink the sweet themselves, even to excess, that will never allow portions, nor scarcely crumbs, to the poor, who may read their own doom in the parable of the rich man, Lu. 16:19, etc. But such know not, or consider not, what God gave them their estates for. Observe, We must not only give to those that offer themselves, but send to those that are out of sight. *The liberal devises liberal things*, and seeks objects of charity. [2.] It must be with piety and devotion: *The joy of the Lord is your strength*. Let it not be a carnal sensual joy, but holy and spiritual, the *joy of the Lord*, joy in the goodness of God, under the direction and government of the grace of God, joy arising from our interest in the love and favour of God and the tokens of his favour. "This joy will be your strength, therefore encourage it; it will be your strength, *First*, For the performance of the other duties of the feast." The more cheerful we are in our religious exercises the more we shall abound in them. *Secondly*, "For all that which you have to do in conformity to the law of God which has been read to you." Holy joy will be oil to the wheels of our obedience. *Thirdly*, "For the resisting of your enemies that are plotting against you." The joy of the Lord will arm us against the assaults of our spiritual enemies, and put our mouths out of taste for those pleasures with which the tempter baits his hooks.

2. The assembly complied with the directions that were given them. Their weeping was *stilled* (v. 11) and they *made great mirth*, v. 12. Note, We ought always to have such a command of every passion as that, however it may break out, it may soon be restrained and called in again when we are convinced that it is either unreasonable or unseasonable. *He that has such a rule as this over his own spirit is better than the mighty*. Observe, (1.) After they had wept they rejoiced. Holy mourning makes way for holy mirth; those that *sow in tears shall reap in joy*; those that tremble at the convictions of the word may triumph in the consolations of it. (2.) The ground of their joy was very good. They made mirth, not because they had the fat to eat and the sweet to drink, and a great deal of good company, but because they had *understood the words that were declared to them*. note, [1.] To have the holy scriptures with us, and helps to understand them, is a very great mercy, which we have abundant reason to rejoice in. Bibles and ministers are the joy of God's Israel. [2.] The better we understand the word of God the more comfort we shall find in it; for the darkness of trouble arises from the darkness of ignorance and mistake. When the words were first declared to them they wept; but, when they understood them, they rejoiced, finding at length precious promises made to those who repented and reformed and that therefore there was hope in Israel.

Verses 13-18

We have here,

I. The people's renewed attendance upon the word. They had spent the greatest part of one day in praying and hearing, and yet were so far from being weary of that new moon and sabbath that the next day after, though it was no festival, the chief of them came together again to hear Ezra expound (v. 13), which they found more delightful and gainful than any worldly pleasure or profit whatsoever. Note, The more we converse with the word of God, if we rightly understand it and be affected with it, the more we shall covet to converse with it, and to increase in our acquaintance with it, saying, *How sweet are thy words unto my mouth!* Those that understand the scriptures well will still be desirous to understand them better. Now the priests and the Levites themselves came with *the chief of the people to Ezra*, that prince of expositors, *to understand the words of the law*, or, as it is in the margin, *that they might instruct in the words of the law*; they came to be taught themselves, that they might be qualified to teach others. Observe, 1. Though, on the first day, Ezra's humility had set them *on his right hand and on his left, as teachers with him* (v. 4, 7), yet now, they being by trial made more sensible than ever of their own deficiencies and his excellencies, on the second day their humility set them at Ezra's feet, as learners of him. 2. Those that would teach others must themselves receive instructions. Priests and Levites must be taught first and then teach.

II. The people's ready obedience to the word, in one particular instance, as soon as they were made sensible of their duty therein. It is probable that Ezra, *after the wisdom of his God that was in his hand* (Ezra 7:25), when they applied to him for instruction out of the law on the second day of the seventh month, read to them those laws which concerned the feasts of that month, and, among the rest, that of the feast of tabernacles, Lev. 23:34; Deu. 16:13. Ministers should preach not only that which is true and good, but that which is seasonable, directing to the *work of the day in its day*. Here is, 1. The divine appointment of the feast of tabernacles reviewed, v. 14, 14. *They found written in the law* a commandment concerning it. Those that diligently search the scriptures will find those things written there which they had forgotten or not duly considered. This feast of tabernacles was a memorial of their dwelling in tents in the wilderness, a representation of our tabernacle state in this world, and a type of the holy joy of the gospel church. The conversion of the nations to the faith of Christ is foretold under the figure of this feast (Zec. 14:16); they shall come to *keep the feast of tabernacles*, as having here no continuing city. This feast was to be proclaimed in all their cities. The people were themselves to fetch boughs of trees (they of Jerusalem fetched them from the mount of Olives) and to make booths, or arbours, of them, in which they were to lodge (as much as the weather would permit) and to make merry during the feast. 2. This appointment religiously observed, v. 16, 17. Then we read and hear the word acceptably and profitably when we do according to what is written therein, when what appears to be our duty is revived after it has been neglected. (1.) They observed the ceremony: *They sat in booths*, which the priests and Levites set up in the courts of the temple; those that had houses of their own set up booths on the roofs of them, or in their courts; and those that had not such conveniences set them up in the streets. This feast had usually been observed (2 Chr. 5:3; Ezra 3:4), but never with such solemnity as now since Joshua's time, when they were newly settled, as they were now newly re-settled in Canaan. That man loves his house too well that cannot find in his heart to quit it, awhile, in compliance either with an ordinance or with a providence of God. (2.) They minded the substance, else the ceremony, how significant soever, would have been

insignificant. [1.] They did it with gladness, with *very great gladness*, rejoicing in God and his goodness to them. All their holy feasts, but this especially, were to be celebrated with joy, which would be much for the honour of God, and their own encouragement in his service. [2.] They attended the reading and expounding of the word of God during all the days of the feast, v. 18. They improved their leisure for this good work. Spare hours cannot be better spent than in studying the scriptures and conversing with them. At this feast of tabernacles God appointed the law to be read once in seven years. Whether this was that year of release in which that service was to be performed (Deu. 31:10, 11) does not appear; however they spent all the days of the feast in that good work, and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, as God had appointed, in which they finished the solemnity the twenty-second day of the month, yet did not separate, for the twenty-fourth day was appointed to be spent in fasting and prayer. Holy joy just not indispose us for godly sorrow any more than godly sorrow for holy joy

Chapter 9

The tenth day of the seventh month between the feast of trumpets (ch. 8:2) and the feast of tabernacles (v. 14) was appointed to be the day of atonement; we have no reason to think but that it was religiously observed, though it is not mentioned. But here we have an account of an occasional fast that was kept a fortnight after that, with reference to the present posture of their affairs, and it was, as that, a day of humiliation. There is a time to weep as well as a time to laugh. We have here an account. I. How this fast was observed (v. 1-3). II. What were the heads of the prayer that was made to God on that occasion, wherein they made a thankful acknowledgment of God's mercies, a penitent confession of sin, and a humble submission to the righteous hand of God in the judgments that were brought upon them, concluding with a solemn resolution of new obedience (v. 4-38).

Verses 1-3

We have here a general account of a public fast which the children of Israel kept, probably by order from Nehemiah, by and with the advice and consent of the chief of the fathers. It was a fast that men appointed, but such a *fast as God had chosen*; for, 1. It was a day *to afflict the soul*, Isa. 58:5. Probably they assembled in the courts of the temple, and they there appeared in sackcloth and in the posture of mourners, with earth on their heads, v. 1. By these outward expressions of sorrow and humiliation they gave glory to God, took shame to themselves, and stirred up one another to repentance. They were restrained from *weeping*, ch. 8:9, but now they were directed to weep. The joy of our holy feasts must give way to the sorrow of our solemn fasts when they come. Every thing is beautiful in its season. 2. It was a day *to loose the bands of wickedness*, and that is the fast that God has chosen, Isa. 58:6. Without this, spreading sackcloth and ashes under us is but a jest. The seed of Israel, because they were a holy seed, appropriated to God and more excellent than their neighbours, *separated themselves from all strangers* with whom they had mingled and joined in affinity, v. 2. Ezra had separated them from their strange wives some years before, but they had relapsed into the same sin, and had either made marriages or at least made friendships with them, and contracted such an intimacy as was a snare to them. But now they separated themselves from the strange children as well as from the strange wives. Those that intend by prayers and covenants to join themselves to God must separate themselves from sin and sinners; for *what communion hath light with darkness?* 3. It was a day of communion with God. *They fasted to him, even to him* (Zec. 7:5); for, (1.) They spoke to him in prayer, offered their pious and devout affections to him in the confession of sin and the adoration of him as the Lord and their God. Fasting without prayer is a body without a soul, a worthless carcase. (2.) They heard him speaking to them by his word; for they read in the book of the law, which is very proper on fasting days, that, in the glass of the law, we may see our deformities and defilements, and know what to acknowledge and what to amend. The word will direct and quicken prayer, for by it the Spirit helps our praying infirmities. Observe how the time was equally divided between these two. Three hours (for that is the fourth part of a day) they spent in reading, expounding, and applying the scriptures, and three hours in confessing sin and praying; so that they staid together six hours, and spent all the time in the solemn acts of religion, without saying, *Behold, what a weariness is it!* The varying of the

exercises made it the less tedious, and, as the word they read would furnish them with matter for prayer, so prayer would make the word the more profitable. Bishop Patrick thinks that they spent the whole twelve hours of the day in devotion, that from six o'clock in the morning till nine they read, and then from nine to twelve they prayed, from twelve to three they read again, and from three till six at night they prayed again. The word of a fast day is good work, and therefore we should endeavour to make a day's work, a good day's work, of it.

Verses 4-38

We have here an account how the work of this fast-day was carried on. 1. The names of the ministers that were employed. They are twice named (v. 4, 5), only with some variation of the names. Either they prayed successively, according to that rule which the apostle gives (1 Co. 14:31, *You may all prophesy one by one*), or, as some think, there were eight several congregations at some distance from each other, and each had a Levite to preside in it. 2. The work itself in which they employed themselves. (1.) They prayed to God, cried to him with a loud voice (v. 4), for the pardon of the sins of Israel and God's favour to them. They cried aloud, not that God might the better hear them, as Baal's worshippers, but that the people might, and to excite their fervency. (2.) They praised God; for the work of praise is not unseasonable on a fast-day; in all acts of devotion we must aim at this, to *give unto God the glory due to his name*. The summary of their prayers we have here upon record; whether drawn up before, as a directory to the Levites what to enlarge on, or recollected after, as the heads of what they had in prayer enlarged upon, is uncertain. Much more no doubt was said than is here recorded, else confessing and worshipping God would not have taken up a fourth part of the day, much less two-fourths.

In this solemn address to God we have,

I. An awful adoration of God, as a perfect and glorious Being, and the fountain of all beings, v. 5, 6. The congregation is called upon to signify their concurrence herewith by standing up; and so the minister directs himself to God, *Blessed be thy glorious name*. God is here adored, 1. As the only living and true God: *Thou art Jehovah alone*, self-existent and independent; there is no God besides thee. 2. As the Creator of all things: *Thou hast made heaven, earth, and seas*, and all that is in them. The first article of our creed is fitly made the first article of our praises. 3. As the great Protector of the whole creation: "Thou preservest in being all the creatures thou hast given being to." God's providence extends itself to the highest beings, for they need it, and to the meanest, for they are not slighted by it. What God has made he will preserve; what he does is done effectually, Eccl. 3:14. 4. As the object of the creatures' praises: "*The host of heaven*, the world of holy angels, *worshippeth thee*, v. 6. But *thy name is exalted above all blessing and praise*; it needs not the praises of the creatures, nor is any addition made to its glory by those praises." The best performances in the praising of God's name, even those of the angels themselves, fall infinitely short of what it deserves. It is not only exalted above our blessing, but above all blessing. Put all the praises of heaven and earth together, and the thousandth part is not said of what might and should be said of the glory of God. *Our goodness extendeth not to him*.

II. A thankful acknowledgment of God's favours to Israel.

1. Many of these are here reckoned up in order before him, and very much to the purpose, for, (1.) We must take all occasions

to mention the loving kindness of the Lord, and *in every prayer give thanks*. (2.) When we are confessing our sins it is good to take notice of the mercies of God as the aggravations of our sins, that we may be the more humbled and ashamed, and call ourselves by the scandalous name of ungrateful. (3.) When we are seeking to God for mercy and relief in the time of distress it is an encouragement to our faith and hope to look back upon our own and our fathers' experiences: "Lord, thou hast done well for us formerly; shall it be all undone again? Art not thou the same God still?"

2. Let us briefly observe the particular instances of God's goodness to Israel here recounted. (1.) The call of Abraham, v. 7. God's favour to him was distinguishing: "Thou didst choose him." His grace in him was powerful to bring him out of Ur of the Chaldees, and, in giving him the name of Abraham, he put honour upon him as his own and assured him that he should be the *father of many nations*. *Look unto Abraham your father* (Isa. 51:2) and see free grace glorified in him. (2.) The covenant God made with him to give the land of Canaan to him and his seed, a type of the better country, v. 8. And this covenant was sure, for God found Abraham's heart faithful before God, and found it so because he made it so (for faith is not of ourselves, it is the gift of God), and therefore performed his words; *for with the upright he will show himself upright*, and wherever he finds a faithful heart he will be found a faithful God. (3.) The deliverance of Israel out of Egypt, v. 9–11. It was seasonable to remember this now that they were interceding for the perfecting of their deliverance out of Babylon. They were then delivered, in compassion to their affliction, in answer to their cry, and in resistance of the pride and insolence of their persecutors. Wherein they dealt proudly, God showed himself *above them* (Ex. 18:11), and so got himself *a name*; for he said, *I will get me honour upon Pharaoh*. Even to this day the name of God is glorified for that wonderful work. It was done miraculously: signs and wonders were shown for the effecting of it; their deliverance was the destruction of their enemies; they were *thrown into the deeps*, as irrecoverably *as a stone into the mighty waters*. (4.) The conducting of them through the wilderness, by the pillar of cloud and fire, which showed them which way they should go, when they should remove, and when and where they should rest, directed all their stages and all their steps, v. 12. It was also a visible token of God's presence with them, to guide and guard them. They mention this again (v. 19), observing that though they had by their sins provoked God to withdraw from them, and leave them to wander and perish in the by-paths of the wilderness, yet in his manifold mercy he continued to lead them, and took not away the *pillar of cloud and fire*, v. 19. When mercies, though forfeited, are continued, we are bound to be doubly thankful. (5.) The plentiful provision made for them in the wilderness, that they might not perish for hunger: Thou *gavest them bread from heaven, and water out of the rock* (v. 15), and, to hold up their hearts, a promise that they should go in and possess the land of Canaan. They had meat and drink, food convenient in the way, and the good land at their journey's end; what would they more? This also is repeated (v. 20, 21) as that which was continued, notwithstanding their provocations: *Forty years didst thou sustain them*. Never was people so long nursed and so tenderly; they were wonderfully provided for, and, in so long a time, *their clothes waxed not old*, and, though the way was rough and tedious, *their feet swelled not*; for they were *carried as upon eagles' wings*. (6.) The giving of the law upon Mount Sinai. This was the greatest favour of all that was done them and the greatest honour that was put upon them. The Lawgiver was very glorious, v. 13. "Thou didst not only send, but camest down thyself, and *didst speak with them*," Deu. 4:33. The law given was very good. No nation under the sun had such

right judgments, true laws, and good statutes, Deu. 4:8. The moral and judicial precepts were true and right, founded upon natural equity and the eternal reasons of good and evil; and even the ceremonial institutions were good, tokens of God's goodness to them and types of gospel grace. Particular notice is taken of the law of the fourth commandment as a great favour to them: *Thou madest known unto them thy holy sabbath*, which was a token of God's particular favour to them, distinguishing them from the nations who had revolted from God and quite lost that ancient part of revealed religion, and was likewise a means of keeping up their communion with him. And, with *the law and the sabbath*, he gave his good Spirit to instruct them, v. 20. Besides the law given on Mount Sinai, the five books of Moses, which he wrote *as he was moved by the Holy Ghost*, were constant instructions to them, particularly the book of Deuteronomy, in which God's Spirit by Moses instructed them fully. Bezaleel was filled *with the Spirit of God* (Ex. 31:3), so was Joshua (Num. 27:18), and Caleb had another spirit. (7.) The putting of them in possession of Canaan, that good land, *kingdoms and nations*, v. 22. They were made so numerous as to replenish it (v. 23) and so victorious as to be masters of it (v. 24); the natives were given into their hands, *that they might do with them as they would*, set their feet, if they pleased, on the necks of their kings. Thus they gained a happy *settlement*, v. 25. Look upon their cities, and you see them strong and well fortified. Look into their houses, and you find them fine and well furnished, filled with all sorts of rich goods. Take a view of the country, and you will say that you never saw such a fat land, so well stored with *vineyards and oliveyards*. All these they found made ready to their hands; so they delighted themselves in the gifts of God's great goodness. They could not wish to be more easy or happy than they were, or might have been, in Canaan, had it not been their own fault. (8.) God's great readiness to pardon their sins, and work deliverance for them, when they had by their provocations brought his judgments upon themselves. When they were in the wilderness they found him *a God ready to pardon* (v. 17), a *God of pardons* (so the margin reads it), who had proclaimed his name as a *God forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin*, who has power to forgive sin, is willing to forgive, and glories in forgiving. Though they forsook him, he did not forsake them, as justly he might have done, but continued his care of them and favour to them. Afterwards, when they were settled in Canaan and sold themselves by their sins into the hands of their enemies, upon their submission and humble request he *gave them saviours* (v. 27), the judges, by whom God wrought many a great deliverance for them when they were on the brink of ruin. This he did, not for any merit of theirs, for their deserved nothing but ill, but according to his mercies, his manifold mercies. (9.) The admonitions and fair warnings he gave them by his servants the prophets. When he delivered them from their troubles he *testified against their sins* (v. 28, 29), that they might not misconstrue their deliverances as connivances at their wickedness. That which was designed in all the testimonies which the prophets bore against them was to bring them again to God's law, to lay their necks under its yoke, and walk by its rule. The end of our ministry is to bring people to God by bringing them to his law, not to bring them to ourselves by bringing them under any law of ours. This we have again (v. 30): *Thou testifiedst against them by thy Spirit in thy prophets*. The testimony of the prophets was the testimony of the Spirit in the prophets, and it was the Spirit of Christ in them, 1 Pt. 1:10, 11. They *spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost*, and what they said is to be received accordingly. God gave them *his Spirit to instruct them* (v. 20), but, they not receiving that instruction, he did by his Spirit testify against them. If we will not suffer God's word to teach and rule us, it will

accuse and judge us. God sends prophets, in compassion to his people (2 Chr. 36:15), that he may not send judgments. (10.) The lengthening out of his patience and the moderating of his rebukes: *Many years did he forbear them* (v. 30), as loth to punish them, and waiting to see if they would repent; and, when he did punish them, he did not *utterly consume them nor forsake them*, v. 31. Had he forsaken them they would have been utterly consumed; but he did not stir up all his wrath, for he designed their reformation, not their destruction. Thus do they multiply, thus do they magnify, the instances of God's goodness to Israel, and we should do in like manner, that the goodness of God, duly considered by us, may lead us to repentance, and overcome our badness. The more thankful we are for God's mercies the more humbled we shall be for our own sins.

III. Here is a penitent confession of sin, their own sins, and the sins of their fathers. The mention of these is interwoven with the memorials of God's favours, that God's goodness, notwithstanding their provocations, might appear the more illustrious, and their sins, notwithstanding his favours, might appear the more heinous. Many passages in this acknowledgment of sins and mercies are taken from Eze. 20:5–26, as will appear by comparing those verses with these; for the word of God is of use to direct us in prayer, and by what he says to us we may learn what to say to him.

1. They begin with the sins of Israel in the wilderness: *They, even our fathers* (so it might better be read), *dealt proudly* (though, considering what they were, and how lately they had come out of slavery, they had no reason to be proud), *and hardened their necks*, v. 16. Pride is at the bottom of men's obstinacy and disobedience; they think it below them to bow their necks to God's yoke, and a piece of state to set up their own will in opposition to the will of God himself. (1.) There were two things which they did not duly give heed to, else they would not have done as they did:—The word of God they heard, but they did not hearken to God's commandments; and the works of God they saw, but they were not mindful of his wonders: had they duly considered them as miracles, they would have obeyed from a principle of faith and holy fear; had they duly considered them as mercies, they would have obeyed from a principle of gratitude and holy love. But, when men make no right use either of God's ordinances or of his providences, what can be expected from them? (2.) Two great sins are here specified; which they were guilty of in the wilderness—meditating a return, [1.] To Egyptian slavery, which, for the sake of the garlick and onions, they preferred before the glorious liberty of the Israel of God attended with some difficulty and inconvenience. *In their rebellion they appointed a captain to return to their bondage*, in distrust of God's power and contempt of his holy promise, v. 17. [2.] To Egyptian idolatry: *They made a molten calf*, and were so sottish as to say, *This is thy God*.

2. They next bewail the provocations of their fathers after they were put in possession of Canaan. Though they were *delighted themselves in God's great goodness*, yet that would not prevail to keep them closely to him; for, *nevertheless, they were disobedient* (v. 26) *and wrought great provocations*. For, (1.) They abused God's prophets, *slew them* because they *testified against them to turn them to God* (v. 26), so returning the greatest injury for the greatest kindness. (2.) They abused his favours: *After they had rest, they did evil again*, v. 28. They were not wrought upon either by their troubles or their deliverances out of trouble. Neither fear nor love would hold them to their duty.

3. They at length come nearer to their own day, and lament the sins which had brought those judgments upon them which they had long been groaning under and were now but in part delivered from: *We have done wickedly* (v. 33): *our kings, our princes,*

our priests, and our fathers, have all been guilty, and we in them, v. 34. Two things they charge upon themselves and their fathers, as the cause of their troubles:—(1.) A contempt of the good law God had given them: They *sinned against thy judgments*, the dictates of divine wisdom, and the demands of divine sovereignty. Though they were told how much it would be for their own advantage to govern themselves by them, for, *if a man do them, he shall live in them* (v. 29), yet they would not do them, and so, in effect, said that they *would not live*. They *forsook their own mercies*. This abridgment of the covenant, *Do this and live*, is taken from Eze. 20:13, and is quoted, Gal. 3:12, to prove that *the law is not of faith*; it was not them as it is now, *Believe and live*, yet they gave a *withdrawing shoulder*, so it is in the margin. They pretended to lay their shoulders under the burden of God's law, and put their shoulders to the work, but they proved withdrawing shoulders; they soon flew off, would not keep to it, would not abide by it. When it came, as we say, to the setting to, they shrunk back, and would not hear. They had a backsliding heart; and, though God by his prophets called them to return, they *would not give ear*, v. 30. He *stretched out his hands, but no man regarded*. (2.) A contempt of the good land God had given them (v. 35): "Our kings have *not served thee in their kingdom*, have not used their power for the support of religion; our people have not served thee in the use of the gifts of thy great goodness, and in that large and fat land which thou not only gavest them by thy grant, but gavest before them by the expulsion of the natives and the complete victories they obtained over them." Those that would not serve God in their own land were made to serve their enemies in a strange land, as was threatened, Deu. 28:47, 48. It is a pity that a good land should have bad inhabitants, but so it was with Sodom. Fatness and fulness often make men proud and sensual.

IV. Here is a humble representation of the judgments of God, which they had been and were now under.

1. Former judgments are remembered as aggravations of their sins, that they had not taken warning. In the days of the judges their *enemies vexed them* (v. 27); and, when they did evil again, God did again *leave them in the hand of their enemies*, who could not have touched them if God had not given them up; but, when God left them, they got and kept dominion over them.

2. Their present calamitous state is laid before the Lord (v. 36, 37): *We are servants this day*. Free-born Israelites are enslaved, and the land which they had long held by a much more honourable tenure than grand serjeantry itself, even by immediate grant from the crown of heaven to them as a peculiar people above all people on the earth, they now held by as base a tenure as villenage itself, by, from, and under, the kings of Persia, whose vassals they were. A sad change! But see what work sin makes! They were bound to personal service: They have *dominion over our bodies*; they held all they had precariously, were tenants at will, and the land-tax that they paid was so great that it amounted even to a rack-rent; so that all the rents, issues, and profits, of their land did in effect accrue to the king, and it was as much as they could do to get a bare subsistence for themselves and their families out of it. This, they honestly own, was for their sins. Poverty and slavery are the fruits of sin; it is sin that brings us into all our distresses.

V. Here is their address to God under these calamities. 1. By way of request, that their trouble might not *seem little*, v. 32. It is the only petition in all this prayer. The trouble was universal; it had come on their *kings, princes, priests, prophets, fathers, and all their people*; they had all shared in the sin (v. 34), and now all shared in the judgment. It was of long continuance: *From the time of the kings of Assyria*, who carried the ten tribes captive, *unto this day*. "Lord, let it not all seem little and not worthy to

be regarded, or not needing to be relieved." They do not prescribe to God what he shall do for them, but leave it to him, only desiring he would please to take cognizance of it, remembering that when he saw the affliction of his people in Egypt to be great he came down to deliver them, Ex. 3:7, 8. In this request they have an eye to God as one that is to be feared (for he is *the great, the mighty, and the terrible, God*), and as one that is to be trusted, for he is *our God* in covenant, and a God that *keeps covenant and mercy*. 2. By way of acknowledgment, notwithstanding, that really it was less than they deserved, v. 33. They own the justice of God in all their troubles, that he had done them no wrong. "We have done wickedly in breaking thy laws, and therefore thou hast done right in bringing all these miseries upon us." Note, It becomes us, when we are under the rebukes of divine Providence, though ever so sharp and ever so long, to justify God and to judge ourselves; for he will be *clear when he judgeth*. Ps. 51:4.

VI. Here is the result and conclusion of this whole matter. After this long remonstrance of their case was made they came at last to this resolution, that they would return to God and to their duty, and oblige themselves never to forsake God, but always to continue in their duty. "Because of all this, we make a sure covenant with God; in consideration of our frequent departures from God, we will now more firmly than ever bind ourselves to him. Because we have smarted so much for sin, we will now stedfastly resolve against it, that we may not any more withdraw the shoulder." Observe, 1. This covenant was made with serious consideration. It is the result of a chain of suitable thoughts, and so is a reasonable service. 2. With great solemnity. It was written, *in perpetuam rei memoriam*—*that it might remain a memorial for all ages*; it was sealed and left upon record, that it might be a witness against them if they dealt deceitfully. 3. With join consent: "*We make* it; we are all agreed in making it, and do it unanimously, that we may strengthen the hands one of another." 4. With fixed resolution: "It is *a sure covenant*, without reserving a power of revocation. It is what we will live and die by, and never go back from." A certain number of the princes, priests, and Levites, were chosen as the representatives of the congregation, to subscribe and seal it for and in the name of the rest. Now was fulfilled that promise concerning the Jews, that, when they returned out of captivity, they should *join themselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant* (Jer. 50:5), and that in Isa. 44:5, that they should *subscribe with their hand unto the Lord*. He that bears an honest mind will not startle at assurances; nor will those that know the deceitfulness of their own hearts think them needless

Chapter 10

We have in this chapter a particular account of the covenant which in the close of the foregoing chapter was resolved upon; they struck while the iron was hot, and immediately put that good resolve in execution, when they were in a good frame, lest, if it should be delayed, it might be dropped. Here we have, I. The names of those that set their hands and seals to it (v. 1–27). II. An account of those who signified their consent and concurrence (v. 28, 29). III. The covenant itself, and the articles of it in general, that they would "keep God's commandments" (v. 29); in particular, that they would not marry with the heathen (v. 30), nor profane the sabbath, nor be rigorous with their debtors (v. 31), and that they would carefully pay their church-dues, for the maintenance of the temple service, which they promise faithfully to adhere to (v. 32–39).

Verses 1-31

When Israel was first brought into covenant with God it was done by sacrifice and the sprinkling of blood, Ex. 24. But here it was done by the more natural and common way of sealing and subscribing the written articles of the covenant, which bound them to no more than was already their duty. Now here we have,

I. The names of those public persons who, as the representatives and heads of the congregation, set their hands and seals to this covenant, because it would have been an endless piece of work for every particular person to do it; and, if these leading men did their part in pursuance of this covenant, their example would have a good influence upon all the people. Now observe, 1. Nehemiah, who was the governor, signed first, to show his forwardness in this work and to set others a good example, v. 1. Those that are above others in dignity and power should go before them in the way of God. 2. Next to him subscribed twenty-two priests, among whom I wonder we do not find Ezra, who was an active man in the solemnity (ch. 8:2) which was but the first day of the same month, and therefore we cannot think he was absent; but he, having before done his part as a scribe, now left it to others to do theirs. 3. Next to the priests, seventeen Levites subscribed this covenant, among whom we find all or most of those who were the mouth of the congregation in prayer, ch. 9:4, 5. This showed that they themselves were affected with what they had said, and would not bind those burdens on others which they themselves declined to touch. Those that lead in prayer should lead in every other good work. 4. Next to the Levites, forty-four of the chief of the people gave it under their hands for themselves and all the rest, chiefly those whom they had influence upon, that they would keep God's commandments. Their names are left upon record here, to their honour, as men that were forward and active in reviving and endeavouring to perpetuate religion in their country. The memory of such shall be blessed. It is observable that most of those who were mentioned, ch. 7:8, etc., as heads of houses or clans, are here mentioned among the first of the chief of the people that subscribed, whoever was the present head bearing the name of him that was head when they came out of Babylon, and these were fittest to subscribe for all those of their father's house. Here are *Parosh, Pahathmoab, Elam, Zathu, Bani* (v. 14), *Azgad, Bebai, Bigvai, Adin, Ater, Hashum, Bezai, Hariph, Anathoth*, and some others in the following verses, that are all found in that catalogue. Those that have interest must use it for God.

II. The concurrence of the rest of the people with them, and the rest of the priests and Levites, who signified their consent to

what their chiefs did. With them joined, 1. Their wives and children; for they had transgressed, and they must reform. Every one that had knowledge and understanding must covenant with God. As soon as young people grow up to be capable of distinguishing between good and evil, and of acting intelligently, they ought to make it their own act and deed to *join themselves to the Lord*. 2. The proselytes of other nations, *all that had separated themselves from the people of the lands*, their gods and their worship, *unto the law of God*, and the observance of that law. See what conversion it; it is separating ourselves from the course and custom of this world, and devoting ourselves to the conduce of the word of God. And, as there is one law, so there is one covenant, one baptism, for the stranger and for him that is born in the land. Observe how the concurrence of the people is expressed, v. 29. (1.) *They clave to their brethren* one and all. Here those whom the court blessed the country blessed too! The commonalty agreed with their nobles in this good work. Great men never look so great as when they encourage religion, and are examples of it; and they would by that, as much as any thing, secure an interest in the most valuable of their inferiors. Let but the nobles cordially espouse religious causes, and perhaps they will find people cleave to them therein closer than they can imagine. Observe, Their nobles are called their *brethren*; for, in the things of God, rich and poor, high and low, meet together. (2.) *They entered into a curse and an oath*. As the nobles confirmed the covenant with their hands and seals, so the people with a curse and an oath, solemnly appealing to God concerning their sincerity, and imprecating his just revenge if they dealt deceitfully. Every oath has in it a conditional curse upon the soul, which makes it a strong bond upon the soul; for our own tongues, if false and lying tongues, will fall, and fall heavily, upon ourselves.

III. The general purport of this covenant. They laid upon themselves no other burden than this necessary thing, which they were already obliged to by all other engagements of duty, interest, and gratitude—to *walk in God's law, and to do all his commandments*, v. 29. Thus David swore that he would *keep God's righteous judgments*, Ps. 119:106. Our own covenant binds us to this, if not more strongly, yet more sensibly, than we were before bound, and therefore we must not think it needless thus to bind ourselves. Observe, When we bind ourselves to do the commandments of God we bind ourselves to do *all his commandments*, and therein to have an eye to him as the Lord and our Lord.

IV. Some of the particular articles of this covenant, such as were adapted to their present temptations. 1. That they would not intermarry with the heathen, v. 30. Many of them had been guilty of this, Ezra 9:1. In our covenants with God we should engage particularly against those sins that we have been most frequently overtaken in and damaged by. Those that resolve to *keep the commandments of God must say to evil doers, Depart*, Ps. 119:115. 2. That they would keep no markets on the sabbath day, or any other day of which the law had said, *You shall do no work therein*. They would not only not sell goods themselves for gain on that day, but they would not encourage the heathen to sell on that day by buying of them, no not victuals, under pretence of necessity; but would buy in their provisions for their families the day before, v. 31. Note, Those that covenant to keep all God's commandments must particularly covenant to keep sabbaths well; for the profanation of them is an inlet to other instances of profaneness. The sabbath is a market day for our souls, but not for our bodies. 3. That they would not be severe in exacting their debts, but would observe the seventh year as a year of release, according to the law, v. 31. In this matter they had been faulty (ch. 5), and here therefore they promise to reform. This was the acceptable fast, to *undo the heavy*

burden, and to let the oppressed go free, Isa. 58:6. It was in the close of the day of expiation that the jubilee trumpet sounded. It was for the neglect of observing the seventh year as a year of rest for the land that God had made it enjoy its sabbaths seventy years (Lev. 26:35), and therefore they covenanted to observe that law. Those are stubborn children indeed that will not amend the fault for which they have been particularly corrected.

Verses 32-39

Having covenanted against the sins they had been guilty of, they proceed in obliging themselves to revive and observe the duties they had neglected. We must not only *cease to do evil*, but *learn to do well*.

I. It was resolved, in general, that the temple service should be carefully kept up, that the work of the house of their God should be done in its season, according to the law, v. 33. Let not any people expect the blessing of God unless they make conscience of observing his ordinances and keeping up the public worship of him. Then it is likely to go well with our houses when care is taken that the work of God's house go on well. It was likewise resolved that they would never *forsake the house of their God* (v. 39), as they and their fathers had done, would not forsake it for the house of any other god, or for the high places, as idolaters did, nor forsake it for their farms and merchandises, as those did that were atheistical and profane. Those that forsake the worship of God forsake God.

II. It was resolved, in pursuance of this, that they would liberally maintain the temple service, and not starve it. The priests were ready to do their part in all the work of God's house, if the people would do theirs, which was to find them with materials to work upon. Now here it was agreed and concluded, 1. That a stock should be raised for the furnishing of God's table and altar plentifully. Formerly there were treasures in the house of the Lord for this purpose, but these were gone, and there was no settled fund to supply the want of them. It was a constant charge to provide show-bread for the table, two lambs for the daily offerings, four for the sabbaths, and more, and more costly, sacrifices for other festivals, occasional sin-offerings, and meat-offerings, and drink-offerings for them all. They had no rich king to provide these, as Hezekiah did; the priests could not afford to provide them, their maintenance was so small; the people therefore agreed to contribute yearly, every one of them, the third part of a shekel, about ten pence a-piece for the bearing of this expense. When every one will act, and every one will give, though but little, towards a good work, the whole amount will be considerable. The tirshatha did not impose this tax, but the people made it an ordinance for themselves, and charged themselves with it, v. 32, 33. 2. That particular care should be taken to provide wood for the altar, to keep the fire always burning upon it, and wherewith to boil the peace-offerings. All of them, priests and Levites as well as people, agreed to bring in their quota, and cast lots in what order they should bring it in, which family first and which next, that there might be a constant supply, and not a scarcity at one time and an overplus at another, v. 34. Thus they provided the fire and the wood, as well as the lambs for the burnt-offerings. 3. That all those things which the divine law had appointed for the maintenance of the priests and Levites should be duly paid in, for their encouragement to mind their business, and that they might not be under any temptation to neglect it for the making of necessary provision for their families. Then the work of the house of God is likely to go on when those that serve at the altar live, and live comfortably, upon the altar. First-fruits and tenths were then the principal branches of the ministers' revenues; and they here resolved, (1.)

To bring in the first-fruits justly, the first-fruits of their ground and trees (Ex. 23:19; Lev. 19:23), the first-born of their children (even the money wherewith they were to be redeemed) and of their cattle, Ex. 13:2, 11, 12 (this was given to the priests, Num. 18:15, 16), also the first-fruits of their dough (Num. 15:21), concerning which there is a particular order given in the prophecy concerning the second temple, Eze. 44:30. (2.) To bring in their tenths likewise, which were due to the Levites (v. 37), and a tenth out of those tenths to the priest, v. 38. This was the law (Num. 18:21–28); but these dues had been withheld, in consequence of which God, by the prophet, charges them with *robbing him* (Mal. 3:8, 9), at the same time encouraging them to be more just to him and his receivers, with a promise that, if they brought the *tithes into the store-house*, he would *pour out blessings upon them*, v. 10. This therefore they resolved to do, that there might be meat in God's house, and plenty in the store-chambers of the temple, where the vessels of the sanctuary were, v. 39. "We will do it (say they) *in all the cities of our tillage*," v. 37. *In all the cities of our servitude*, so the Septuagint, for they were servants in their own land, ch. 9:36. But (as Mr. Poole well observes), though they paid great taxes to the kings of Persia, and had much hardship put upon them, they would not make that an excuse for not paying their tithes, but would render to God the things that were his, as well as to Caesar the things that were his. We must do what we can in works of piety and charity notwithstanding the taxes we pay to the government, and cheerfully perform our duty to God in our servitude, which will be the surest way to ease and liberty in God's due time.

Chapter 11

Jerusalem was walled round, but it was not as yet fully inhabited, and therefore was weak and despicable. Nehemiah's next care is to bring people into it; of that we have here an account. I. The methods taken to replenish it (v. 1, 2). II. The principal persons that resided there, of Judah and Benjamin (v. 3-9), of the priests and Levites (v. 10-19). III. The several cities and villages of Judah and Benjamin that were peopled by the rest of their families (v. 20-36).

Verses 1-19

Jerusalem is called here *the holy city* (v. 1), because there the temple was, and that was the place God had chosen to put his name there; upon this account, one would think, the holy seed should all have chosen to dwell there and have striven for a habitation there; but, on the contrary, it seems they declined dwelling there, 1. Because a greater strictness of conversation was expected from the inhabitants of Jerusalem than from others, which they were not willing to come up to. Those who care not for being holy themselves are shy of dwelling in a holy city; they would not dwell in the *New Jerusalem* itself for that reason, but would wish to have a continuing city here upon earth. Or, 2. Because Jerusalem, of all places, was most hated by the heathen their neighbours, and against it their malicious designs were levelled, which made that the post of danger (as the post of honour usually is) and therefore they were not willing to expose themselves there. Fear of persecution and reproach, and of running themselves into trouble, keeps many out of the holy city, and makes them backward to appear for God and religion, not considering that, as Jerusalem is with a special malice threatened and insulted by its enemies, so it is with a special care protected by its God and made a *quiet habitation*, Isa. 33:20; Ps. 46:4, 5. Or, 3. Because it was more for their worldly advantage to dwell in the country. Jerusalem was no trading city, and therefore there was no money to be got there by merchandise, as there was in the country by corn and cattle. Note, *All seek their own, not the things that are Jesus Christ's*, Phil. 2:21. It is a general and just complaint that most people prefer their own wealth, credit, pleasure, ease, and safety, before the glory of God and the public good. People being thus backward to dwell at Jerusalem, now that it was poor, we are here told,

I. By what means it was replenished. 1. The rulers dwelt there, v. 1. That was the proper place for them to reside in, because *there were set the thrones of judgment* (Ps. 122:5), and thither, in all difficult matters, the people resorted with their last appeals. And if it were an instance of eminent affection to the house of God, zeal for the public good, and of faith, and holy courage, and self-denial, to dwell there at this time, the rulers would be examples of these to their inferiors. Their dwelling there would invite and encourage others to dwell there too. *Magnates magnetes—the mighty are magnetic*. When great men choose the holy city for their habitation their example brings holiness into reputation, and their zeal will provoke very many. 2. There were some that willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem, nobly foregoing their own secular interest for the public welfare, v. 2. It is upon record, to their honour, that when others were shy of venturing upon difficulty, loss, and danger, *they sought the good of Jerusalem, because of the house of the Lord their God. Those shall prosper that thus love Zion*, Ps. 122:6, 9. It is said, *The people blessed them*. They praised them; they prayed for them; they praised God for them. Many that

do not appear forward themselves for the public good will yet give a good word to those that do. God and man will bless those that are public blessings, which should encourage us to be zealous in doing good. 3. They, finding that *yet there was room*, concluded upon a review of their whole body to bring one in ten to dwell in Jerusalem; who they should be was determined by lot, the disposal whereof, all knew, was of the Lord. This would prevent strife, and would be a great satisfaction to those on whom the lot fell to dwell at Jerusalem, that they plainly saw God appointing the bounds of their habitation. They observed the proportion of one in ten, as we may suppose, to bring the balance between the city and country to a just and equal poise; so it seems to refer to the ancient rule of giving the tenth to God; and what is given to the holy city he reckons given to himself.

II. By what persons it was replenished. A general account is here given of the inhabitants of Jerusalem because the *governors of Judah* looked upon them as *their strength in the Lord of hosts their God*, and valued them accordingly, Zec. 12:5. 1. Many of the children of Judah and Benjamin dwelt there; for, originally, part of the city lay in the lot of one of those tribes and part in that of the other; but the greater part was in the lot of Benjamin, and therefore here we find of the children of Judah only 468 families in Jerusalem (v. 6), but of Benjamin 928, v. 7, 8. Thus small were its beginnings, but afterwards, before our Saviour's time, it grew much more populous. Those of Judah all descended from Perez, or Pharez, that son of Judah of whom, as concerning the flesh, Christ came. And, though the Benjamites were more in number, yet of the men of Judah it is said (v. 6) that they were valiant men, fit for service, and able to defend the city in case of an attack. Judah has not lost its ancient character of a lion's whelp, bold and daring. Of the Benjamites that dwelt in Jerusalem we are here told who was *overseer*, and who was second, v. 9. For it is as necessary for a people to have good order kept up among themselves as to be fortified against the attacks of their enemies from abroad, to have good magistrates as to have good soldiers. 2. The priests and Levites did many of them settle at Jerusalem; where else should men that were holy to God dwell, but in the holy city? (1.) Most of the priests, we may suppose, dwelt there, for their business lay where the temple was. Of those that did the work of the house in their courses here were 822 of one family, 242 of another, and 128 of another, v. 12–14. It was well that those labourers were not few. It is said of some of them that they were *mighty men of valour* (v. 14); it was necessary that they should be so, for the priesthood was not only a work, which required might, but a warfare, which required valour, especially now. Of one of these priests it is said that he was *the son of one of the great men*. It was no disparagement to the greatest man they had to have his son in the priesthood; he might magnify his office, for his office did not in the least diminish him. (2.) Some of the Levites also came and dwelt at Jerusalem, yet but few in comparison, 284 in all (v. 18), with 172 porters (v. 19), for much of their work was to *teach the good knowledge of God* up and down the country, for which purpose they were to be scattered in Israel. As many as there was occasion for attended at Jerusalem; the rest were doing good elsewhere. [1.] It is said of one of the Levites that he had *the oversight of the outward business of the house of God*, v. 16. The priests were chief managers of the business within the temple gates; but this Levite was entrusted with the secular concerns of God's house, that were *in ordine ad spiritualia—subservient to its spiritual concerns*, the collecting of the contributions, the providing of materials for the temple service, and the like, which it was necessary to oversee, else the inward business would have been starved and have stood still. Those who take care of the *ta exo* *the outward concerns* of the church, the serving of its tables, are as necessary in their place

as those who take care of its *ta esojits inward concerns*, who give themselves to the word and prayer. [2.] It is said of another that he was *the principal to begin the thanksgiving in prayer*. Probably he had a good ear and a good voice, and was a scientific singer, and therefore was chosen to lead the psalm. He was precentor in the temple. Observe, Thanksgiving is necessary in prayer; they should go together; giving thanks for former mercies is a becoming way of begging further mercies. And care should be taken in public service that every thing be done in the best manner, *decently and in good order*— in prayer, that one speak and the rest join-in singing, that one begin and the rest follow.

Verses 20-36

Having given an account of the principal persons that dwelt in Jerusalem (a larger account of whom he had before, 1 Chr. 9:2, etc.), Nehemiah, in these verses, gives us some account of the other cities, in which dwelt *the residue of Israel*, v. 20. It was requisite that Jerusalem should be replenished, yet not so as to drain the country. *The king himself is served of the field*, which will do little service if there be not hands to manage it. Let there therefore be no strife, no envy, no contempt, no ill will, between the inhabitants of the cities and those of the villages; both are needful, both useful, and neither can be spared. 1. The Nethinims, the posterity of the Gibeonites, dwelt in Ophel, which was upon the wall of Jerusalem (ch. 3:26), because they were to do the servile work of the temple, which therefore they must be posted near to, that they might be ready to attend, v. 21. 2. Though the Levites were dispersed through the cities of Judah, yet they had an overseer who resided in Jerusalem, superior of their order and their provincial, to whom they applied for direction, who took care of their affairs and took cognizance of their conduct, whether they did their duty, v. 22. 3. Some of the singers were appointed to look after the necessary repairs of the temple, being ingenious men, and having leisure between their hours of service; they were *over the business of the house of God*, v. 22. And, it seems, the king of Persia had such a kindness for their office that he allotted a particular maintenance for them, besides what belonged to them as Levites, v. 23. 4. Here is one that was the king's commissioner at Jerusalem. He was of the posterity of Zerah (v. 24); for of *that* family of Judah there were some new settled in Jerusalem, and not all of Pharez, as appears by that other catalogue, 1 Chr. 9:6. He is said to be *at the king's hand*, or *on the king's part*, in *all matters concerning the people*, to determine controversies that arose between the king's officers and his subjects, to see that what was due to the king from the people was duly paid in and what was allowed by the king for the temple service was duly paid out, and happy it was for the Jews that one of themselves was in this post. 5. Here is an account of the villages, or country towns, which were inhabited by the residue of Israel—the towns in which the children of Judah dwelt (v. 25–30), those that were inhabited by the children of Benjamin (v. 31–35), and divisions for the Levites among both, v. 36. We will now suppose them safe and easy, though few and poor, but by the blessing of God they were likely to increase in wealth and power, and they would have been more likely if there had not been that general profaneness among them, and lukewarmness in religion, with which they were charged in God's name by the prophet Malachi, who, it is supposed, prophesied about this time, and in whom prophecy ceased for some ages, till it revived in the great prophet and his forerunner.

Chapter 12

In this chapter are preserved upon record, I. The names of the chief of the priests and the Levites that came up with Zerubbabel (v. 1-9). II. The succession of the high priests (v. 10, 11). III. The names of the next generation of the other chief priests (v. 12-21). IV. The eminent Levites that were in Nehemiah's time (v. 22-26). V. The solemnity of dedicating the wall of Jerusalem (v. 27-43). VI. The settling of the offices of the priests and Levites in the temple (v. 44-47).

Verses 1-26

We have here the names, and little more than the names, of a great many priests and Levites, that were eminent in their day among the returned Jews. Why this register should be here inserted by Nehemiah does not appear, perhaps to keep in remembrance those good men, that posterity might know to whom they were beholden, under God, for the happy revival and re-establishment of their religion among them. Thus must we contribute towards the performance of that promise, Ps. 112:6, *The righteous shall be in everlasting remembrance*. Let the memory of the just be blessed, be perpetuated. It is a debt we still owe to faithful ministers to *remember our guides*, who have *spoken to us the word of God*, Heb. 13:7. Perhaps it is intended to stir up their posterity, who succeeded them in the priest's office and inherited their dignities and preferments, to imitate their courage and fidelity. It is good to know what our godly ancestors and predecessors were, that we may learn thereby what we should be. We have here, 1. The names of the priests and Levites that came up with the first out of Babylon, when Jeshua was high priest. Jeremiah and Ezra are mentioned with the first (v. 1), but, it is supposed, not Jeremiah the prophet nor Ezra the scribe; the fame of the one was long before and that of the other some time after, though both of them were priests. Of one of the Levites it is said (v. 8) that he was *over the thanksgiving*, that is, he was entrusted to see that the psalms, the thanksgiving psalms, were constantly sung in the temple in due time and manner. The Levites kept their turns in their watches, reliving one another as becomes brethren, fellow-labourers, and fellow-soldiers. 2. The succession of high priests during the Persian monarchy, from Jeshua (or Jesus), who was high priest at the time of the restoration, to Jaddua (or Jaddus), who was high priest when Alexander the Great, after the conquest of Tyre, came to Jerusalem, and paid great respect to this Jaddus, who met him in his pontifical habit, and showed him the prophecy of Daniel, which foretold his conquests. 3. The next generation of priests, who were chief men, and active in the days of Joiakim, sons of the first set. Note, We have reason to acknowledge God's favour to his church, and care of it, in that, as one generation of ministers passes away, another comes. All those who are mentioned v. 1, etc., as eminent in their generation, are again mentioned, though with some variation in several of the names, v. 12, etc., except two, as having sons that were likewise eminent in their generation—a rare instance, that twenty good fathers should leave behind them twenty good sons (for so many here are) that filled up their places. 4. The next generation of Levites, or rather a latter generation; for those priests who are mentioned flourished in the days of Joiakim the high priest, these Levites in the days of Eliashib, v. 22. Perhaps *then* the forementioned families of the priests began to degenerate, and the third generation of them came short of the first two; but the work of God shall never fail for want of instruments. Then a generation of Levites was *raised up*, who were *recorded chief of the fathers* (v. 22), and were eminently serviceable to the interests of the

church, and their service not the less acceptable either to God or to his people for their being Levites only, of the lower rank of ministers. Eliashib the high priest being allied to Tobiah (ch. 13:4), the other priests grew remiss; but then the Levites appeared the more zealous, as appears by this, that those who were now employed in expounding (ch. 8:7) and in praying (ch. 9:4, 5) were all Levites, not priests, regard being had to their personal qualifications more than to their order. These Levites were some of them singers (v. 24), *to praise and give thanks*, others of them porters (v. 25), *keeping the ward at the thresholds of the gates, and both according to the command of David*.

Verses 27-43

We have read of the building of the wall of Jerusalem with a great deal of fear and trembling; we have here an account of the dedicating of it with a great deal of joy and triumph. *Those that sow in tears shall thus reap*.

I. We must enquire what was the meaning of this dedication of the wall; we will suppose it to include the dedication of the city too (*continens pro contento the thing containing for the thing contained*), and therefore it was not done till the city was pretty well replenished, ch. 11:1. It was a solemn thanksgiving to God for his great mercy to them in the perfecting of this undertaking, of which they were the more sensible because of the difficulty and opposition they had met with in it. 2. They hereby devoted the city in a peculiar manner to God and to his honour, and took possession of it for him and in his name. All our cities, all our houses, must have holiness to the Lord written upon them; but this city was (so as never any other was) a *holy city, the city of the great King* (Ps. 48:2 and Mt. 5:35): it had been so ever since God chose it to put his name there, and as such, it being now refitted, it was afresh dedicated to God by the builders and inhabitants, in token of their acknowledgment that they were his tenants, and their desire that it might still be is and that the property of it might never be altered. Whatever is done for their safety, ease, and comfort, must be designed for God's honour and glory. 3. They hereby put the city and its walls under the divine protection, owning that *unless the Lord kept the city the walls were built in vain*. When this city was in possession of the Jebusites, they committed the guardianship of it to their gods, though they were blind and lame ones, 2 Sa. 5:6. With much more reason do the people of God commit it to his keeping who is all-wise and almighty. The superstitious founders of cities had an eye to the lucky position of the heavens (see Mr. Gregory's works, p. 29, etc.); but these pious founders had an eye to God only, to his providence, and not to fortune.

II. We must observe with what solemnity it was performed, under the direction of Nehemiah. 1. The Levites from all parts of the country were summoned to attend. The city must be dedicated to God, and therefore his ministers must be employed in the dedicating of it, and the surrender must pass through their hands. When those solemn feasts were over (ch. 8 and 9) they went home to their respective posts, to mind their cures in the country; but now their presence and assistance were again called for. 2. Pursuant to this summons, there was a general rendezvous of all the Levites, v. 28, 29. Observe in what method they proceeded. (1.) They *purified themselves*, v. 30. We are concerned to *cleanse our hands*, and *purify our hearts*, when any work for God is to pass through them. They purified themselves and then the people. Those that would be instrumental to sanctify others must sanctify themselves, and set themselves apart for God, with purity of mind and sincerity of intention. Then they purified *the gates and the wall*. Then may we expect comfort when we are prepared to receive it. *To the pure all things are*

pure (Tit. 1:15); and, to those who are sanctified, houses and tables, and all their creature comforts and enjoyments, are sanctified, 1 Tim. 4:4, 5. This purification was performed, it is probable, by sprinkling the *water of purifying* (or of *separation*, as it is called, Num. 19:9) on *themselves* and the *people*, the walls and the gates—a type of the blood of Christ, with which our consciences being *purged from dead works*, we become fit to *serve the living God* (Heb. 9:14) and to be his care. (2.) The princes, priests, and Levites, walked round upon the wall in two companies, with musical instruments, to signify the dedication of it all to God, the whole circuit of it (v. 36); so that it is likely they sung psalms as they went along, to the praise and glory of God. This procession is here largely described. They had a rendezvous at one certain place, where they divided themselves into two companies. Half of the princes, with several priests and Levites, went on the right hand, Ezra leading their van, v. 36. The other half of the princes and priests, who gave thanks likewise, went to the left hand, Nehemiah bringing up the rear, v. 38. At length both companies met in the temple, where they joined their thanksgivings, v. 40. The crowd of people, it is likely, walked on the ground, some within the wall and others without, one end of this ceremony being to affect them with the mercy they were giving thanks for, and to perpetuate the remembrance of it among them. Processions, for such purposes, have their use. (3.) The people *greatly rejoiced*, v. 43. While the princes, priests, and Levites, testified their joy and thankfulness by *great sacrifices, sound of trumpet, musical instruments, and songs of praise*, the common people testified theirs by loud shouts, which were heard afar off, further than the more harmonious sound of their songs and music: and these shouts, coming from a sincere and hearty joy, are here taken notice of; for God overlooks not, but graciously accepts, the honest zealous services of mean people, though there is in them little of art and they are far from being fine. It is observed that *the women and children rejoiced*; and their hosannas were not despised, but recorded to their praise. All that share in public mercies ought to join in public thanksgivings. The reason given is that *God had made them rejoice with great joy*. He had given them both matter for joy and hearts to rejoice; his providence had made them safe and easy, and then his grace made them cheerful and thankful. The baffled opposition of their enemies, no doubt, added to their joy and mixed triumph with it. Great mercies call for the most solemn returns of praise, *in the courts of the Lord's house, in the midst of thee, O Jerusalem!*

Verses 44-47

We have here an account of the remaining good effects of the universal joy that was at the dedication of the wall. When the solemnities of a thanksgiving day leave such impressions on ministers and people as that both are more careful and cheerful in doing their duty afterwards, then they are indeed acceptable to God and turn to a good account. So it was here. 1. The ministers were more careful than they had been of their work; the respect the people paid them upon this occasion encouraged them to diligence and watchfulness, v. 45. *The singers kept the ward of their God*, attending in due time to the duty of their office; the *porters, too, kept the ward of the purification*, that is, they took care to preserve the purity of the temple by denying admission to those that were ceremonially unclean. When the joy of the Lord thus engages us to our duty, and enlarges us in it, it is then an earnest of that joy which, in concurrence with the perfection of holiness, will be our everlasting bliss. 2. The people were more careful than they had been of the maintenance of their ministers. The people, at the dedication of the wall, among other things which they made matter of their joy, rejoiced *for the priests and for the Levites that waited*, v. 44. They had a great deal

of comfort in their ministers, and were glad of them. When they observed how diligently they waited, and what pains they took in their work, they rejoiced in them. Note, The surest way for ministers to recommend themselves to their people, and gain an interest in their affections, is *to wait on their ministry* (Rom. 12:7), to be humble and industrious, and to mind their business. When these did so the people thought nothing too much to do for them, to encourage them. The law had provided then *their portions* (v. 44), but what the better were they for that provision if what the law appointed them either was not duly collected or not justly paid to them? Now, (1.) Care is here taken for the collecting of their dues. They were modest, and would rather lose their right than call for it themselves. The people were many of them careless and would not bring their dues unless they were called upon; and therefore *some were appointed* whose office it should be to gather into the treasuries, *out of the fields of the cities, the portions of the law for the priests and Levites* (v. 44), that their portion might not be lost for want of being demanded. This is a piece of good service both to ministers and people, that the one may not come short of their maintenance nor the other of their duty. (2.) Care is taken that, being *gathered in*, they might be duly *paid out*, v. 47. They gave the singers and porters their daily portion, over and above what was due to them as Levites; for we may suppose that when David and Solomon appointed them their work (v. 45, 46), above what was required from them as Levites, they settled a fund for their further encouragement. Let those that labour more abundantly in the word and doctrine be counted worthy of this double honour. As for the other Levites, the tithes, here called *the holy things*, were duly set apart for them, out of which they paid the priests their tithe according to the law. Both are said to be *sanctified*; when what is contributed, either voluntarily or by law, for the support of religion and the maintenance of the ministry, is given with an eye to God and his honour, it is sanctified, and shall be accepted of him accordingly, and it will *cause the blessing to rest on the house* and all that is in it, Eze. 44:30.

Chapter 13

Nehemiah, having finished what he undertook for the fencing and filling of the holy city, returned to the king his master, who was not willing to be long without him, as appears (v. 6). But, after some time, he obtained leave to come back again to Jerusalem, to redress grievances, and purge out some corruptions which had crept in in his absence; and very active he was in reforming several abuses, which here we have an account of. I. He turned out from Israel the mixed multitude, the Moabites and Ammonites especially (v. 1-3). With a particular indignation, he expelled Tobiah out of the lodgings he had got in the court of the temple (v. 4-9). II. He secured the maintenance of the priests and Levites to them more firmly than it had been (v. 10-14). III. He restrained the profanation of the sabbath day, and provided for the due sanctification of it (v. 15-22). IV. He checked the growing mischief of marrying strange wives (v. 23-31).

Verses 1-9

It was the honour of Israel, and the greatest preservation of their holiness, that they were a peculiar people, and were so to keep themselves, and not to mingle with the nations, nor suffer any of them to incorporate with them. Now here we have,

I. The law to this purport, which happened to be read *on that day, in the audience of the people* (v. 1), on the day of the dedication of the wall, as it should seem, for with their prayers and praises they joined the reading of the word; and though it was long after that the other grievances, here mentioned, were redressed by Nehemiah's power, yet this of the mixed multitude might be redressed then by the people's own act, for so it seems to be, v. 3. Or, perhaps, it was on the anniversary commemoration of that day, some years after, and therefore said to be *on that day*. They found a law, that the Ammonites and Moabites should not be naturalized, should not settle among them, nor unite with them, v. 1. The reason given is because they had been injurious and ill-natured to the Israel of God (v. 2), had not shown them common civility, but sought their ruin, though they not only did them no harm, but were expressly forbidden to do them any. This law we have, with this reason, Deu. 23:3-5.

II. The people's ready compliance with this law, v. 3. See the benefit of the public reading of the word of God; when it is duly attended to it discovers to us sin and duty, good and evil, and shows us wherein we have erred. Then we profit by the discovery when by it we are wrought upon to separate ourselves from all that evil to which we had addicted ourselves. They *separated from Israel all the mixed multitude*, which had of old been a snare to them, for the *mixed multitude fell a lusting*, Num. 11:4. These inmates they expelled, as usurpers and dangerous.

III. The particular case of Tobiah, who was an Ammonite, and to whom, it is likely, the historian had an eye in the recital of the law (v. 1), and the reason of it, v. 2. For he had the same enmity to Israel that his ancestors had, the spirit of an Ammonite, witness his indignation at Nehemiah (ch. 2:10) and the opposition he had given to his undertakings, ch. 4:7, 8. Observe, 1. How basely Eliashib the chief priest took this Tobiah in to be a lodger even in the courts of the temple. (1.) He was allied to Tobiah (v. 4), by marriage first and then by friendship. His grandson had married Sanballat's daughter, v. 28. Probably some other of his family had married Tobiah's, and (would you think it?) the high priest thought the alliance an honour to his family,

and was very proud of it, though really it was his greatest disgrace, and what he had reason to be ashamed of. It was expressly provided by the law that the high priest should marry *one of his own people*, else he *profanes his seed among his people*, Lev. 21:14, 15. And for Eliashib to contract an alliance with an Ammonite, a *servant* (for so he is called) and to value himself upon it, probably because he has a wit and a beau, and cried up for a fine gentleman (ch. 6:19), was such a contempt of the crown of his consecration as one would not wish should be told in Gath or published in the streets of Ashkelon. (2.) Being allied to him, he must be acquainted with him. Tobiah, being a man of business, has often occasion to be at Jerusalem, I doubt upon no good design. Eliashib is fond of his new kinsman, pleased with his company, and must have him as near him as he can. He has not a room for him stately enough in his own apartment, in the courts of the temple; therefore, out of several little chambers which had been used for store-chambers, by taking down the partitions, he contrived to make one great chamber, a state-room for Tobiah, v. 5. A wretched thing it was, [1.] That Tobiah the Ammonite should be entertained with respect in Israel, and have a magnificent reception. [2.] That the high priest, who should have taught the people the law and set them a good example, should, contrary to the law, give him entertainment, and make use of the power he had, as overseer of the chambers of the temple, for that purpose. [3.] That he should lodge him in the courts of God's house, as if to confront God himself; this was next to setting up an idol there, as the wicked kings of old had done. An Ammonite must not *come into the congregation*; and shall one of the worst and vilest of the Ammonites be courted into the temple itself, and caressed there? [4.] That he should throw out the stores of the temple, to make room for him, and so expose them to be lost, wasted, and embezzled, though they were the *portions of the priests*, merely to gratify Tobiah. Thus did he *corrupt the covenant of Levi*, as Malachi complained at this time, ch. 2:8. Well might Nehemiah add (v. 6), *But all this time was not I at Jerusalem*. If he had been there, the high priest durst not have done such a thing. The envious one, who sows tares in God's field, knows how to take an opportunity to do it when the *servants sleep* or are absent, Mt. 13:25. The golden calf was made when Moses was in the mount.

2. How bravely Nehemiah, the chief governor, threw him out, and all that belonged to him, and restored the chambers to their proper use. When he came to Jerusalem, and was informed by the good people who were troubled at it what an intimacy had grown between their chief priest and their chief enemy, it *grieve him sorely* (v. 7, 8) that God's house should be so profaned, his enemies so caressed and trusted, and his cause betrayed by him that should have been its protector and patron. Nothing grieves a good man, a good magistrate, more than to see the ministers of God's house do any wicked thing. Nehemiah has power and he will use it for God. (1.) Tobiah shall be expelled. He fears not disobliging him, fears not his resentments, or Eliashib's, nor excuses himself from interposing in an affair that lay within the jurisdiction of the high priest; but, like one zealously affected in a good thing, he expels the intruder, by casting forth all his household stuff. He did not seize it for his own use, but cast it out, that Tobiah, who it is probable was now absent, when he came again, might have no conveniences for his reception there. Our Saviour thus *cleansed the temple*, that the *house of prayer* might not be a *den of thieves*. And thus those that would expel sin out of their hearts, those living temples, must throw out its household stuff and all the provision made for it, strip it, starve it, and take away all those things that are the food and fuel of lust; this is, in effect, to mortify it. (2.) The temple stores shall be brought in again, and the *vessels of the house of God put in their places*; but the chambers must first

be sprinkled with the water of purification, and so cleansed, because they had been profaned. Thus, when sin is cast out of the heart by repentance, let the blood of Christ be applied to it by faith, and then let it be furnished with the graces of God's Spirit for every good work.

Verses 10-14

Here is another grievance redressed by Nehemiah.

I. The Levites had been wronged. This was the grievance: their *portions had not been given them*, v. 10. Perhaps Tobiah, when he took possession of the store-chambers, seized the stores too, and, by the connivance of Eliashib, converted them to his own use. The complaint is not that they were not collected from the people, but that they were not given to the Levites, and the Levites were so modest as not to sue for them; *for the Levites and singers fled every one to his field*. This comes in as a reason either, (1.) Why their payments were withheld. The Levites were non-residents: when they should have been doing their work about the temple, they were at their farms in the country; and therefore the people were little inclined to give them their maintenance. If ministers have not the encouragement they should have, let them consider whether they themselves be not accessory to the contempt they are under, by the neglect of their business. Or rather, (2.) It is the reason why Nehemiah soon perceived that their dues had been denied them, because he missed them from their posts. "Where are the singers" (said Nehemiah); "why do not they attend according to their office, to praise God?" "Why, truly, they have gone every one to his country seat, to get a livelihood for themselves and their families out of their grounds; for their profession would not maintain them." A scandalous maintenance makes a scandalous ministry. The work is neglected because the workmen are. It was not long since the payment of the salaries appointed for the singers was put into a very good method (ch. 12:47); and yet how soon did it fail for want of being looked after!

II. Nehemiah laid the fault upon the rulers, who should have taken care that the Levites minded their business and had all due encouragement therein. This is required from Christian magistrates, that they use their power to oblige ministers to do their duty, and people to do theirs. Nehemiah began with the rulers, and called them to an account: "*Why is the house of God forsaken?*" v. 11. Why are the Levites starved out of it? Why did not you take notice of this and prevent it?" The people *forsook the Levites*, which was expressly forbidden (Deu. 12:19; 14:27); and then the Levites forsook their post in the house of God. Both ministers and people who forsake religion and the services of it, and magistrates too who do not what they can to keep them to it, will have a great deal to answer for.

III. He delayed not to bring the dispersed Levites to *their places* again, and set them in *their stations* (as the word is), v. 11. A Levite in his field (*clericus in foroa minister keeping the market*) is out of his station. God's house is his place, and there let him be found. Many that are careless would do much better than they do if they were but called upon. *Say to Archippus, Take heed to thy ministry.*

IV. He obliged the people to bring in their tithes, v. 12. His zeal provoked theirs; and, when they saw the Levites at their work, they could not for shame withhold their wages any longer, but honestly and cheerfully brought them in. The better church-work is done the better will church-dues be paid.

V. He provided that just and prompt payment should be made of the Levites' stipends. Commissioners were appointed to see to this (v. 13), and they were such as *were accounted faithful*, that is, had approved themselves so in other trusts committed to them, and so had *purchased to themselves this good degree*, 1 Tim. 3:13. Let men be tried first and then trusted, tried in the less and then trusted with more. Their office was to receive and pay, to distribute to their brethren in due season and due proportions.

VI. Having no recompence (it is a question whether he had thanks) from those for whom he did these good services, he looks up to God as his paymaster (v. 14): *Remember me, O my God! concerning this*. Nehemiah was a man much in pious ejaculations; on every occasion he looked up to God, and committed himself and his affairs to him. 1. He here reflects with comfort and much satisfaction upon what he had done for the house of God and the offices thereof; it pleased him to think that he had been any way instrumental to revive and support religion in his country and to reform what was amiss. What kindness any show to God's ministers, thus shall it be returned into their own bosoms, in the secret joy they shall have there, not only in having done well, but in having done good, good to many, good to souls. 2. He here refers it to God to consider him for it, not in pride, or as boasting of what he had done, much less depending upon it as his righteousness, or as if he thought he had made God a debtor to him, but in a humble appeal to him concerning his integrity and honest intention in what he had done, and a believing expectation that he would not be unrighteous to *forget his work and labour of love*, Heb. 6:10. Observe how modest he is in his requests. He only prays, *Remember me*, not *Reward me*—*Wipe not out my good deeds*, not *Publish them, Record them*. Yet he was rewarded and his good deeds were recorded; for God does more than we are able to ask. Note, Deeds done *for the house of God and the offices of it*, for the support of religion and the encouragement of it, are good deeds. There is both righteousness and godliness in them, and God will certainly remember them, and not wipe them out; they shall in no wise lose their reward.

Verses 15-22

Here is another instance of that blessed reformation in which Nehemiah was so active. He revived sabbath-sanctification, and maintained the authority of the fourth commandment; and a very good deed this was for the house of God and the offices thereof, for, where holy time is over-looked and made nothing of, it is not strange if all holy duties be neglected. Here is, I. A remonstrance of the abuse. The law of the sabbath was very strict and much insisted one, and with good reason, for religion is never in the throne while sabbaths are trodden under foot. But Nehemiah discovered even in Judah, among those to whom sabbaths were given for a sign, this law wretchedly violated. His own eyes were his informers. Magistrates who are in care to discharge their duty aright will as much as may be *see with their own eyes*, and *accomplish a diligent search* to find out that which is evil. To his great grief it appeared that there was a general profanation of the sabbath, that holy day, even in Jerusalem, that holy city, which was so lately dedicated to God. 1. The husbandmen trod their wine-presses and brought home their corn on that day (v. 15), through there was an express command that *in earing-time, and in harvest-time, they should rest* on the sabbaths (Ex. 34:21), because then they might be tempted to take a greater liberty, and to fancy that God would indulge them in it. 2. The carriers *loaded their asses with all manner of burdens*, and made no scruple of it, though there was a

particular proviso in the law for the cattle resting (Deu. 5:14) and that they should *bear no burden on the sabbath day*, Jer. 17:21. 3. The hawkers, and pedlars, and petty chapmen, that were men of Tyre, that famous trading city, *sold all manner of wares* on the sabbath day (v. 16); and the children of Judah and Jerusalem had so little grace as to buy of them, and so encourage them in making our Father's day a day of merchandise, contrary to the law of the fourth commandment, which forbids the *doing any manner of work*. No wonder there was a general decay of religion and corruption of manners among this people when they *forsook the sanctuary* and *profaned the sabbath*.

II. The reformation of it. Those that are jealous for the honour of God cannot bear to see his sabbath profaned. Observe in what method this good man proceeded in his zeal for the sabbath.

1. *He testified against those* who profaned it, v. 15, and again v. 21. He not only expressed his own dislike of it, but endeavoured to convince them that it was a great sin, and showed them the testimony of the word of God against it. He would not punish it till he had laid open the evil of it.

2. He reasoned with the rulers concerning it, took the nobles of Judah to task, and contended with them, v. 17. The greatest of men are not too high to be told of their faults by those whose proper office it is to reprove them; nay, great men should be, as here, contended with in the first place, because of the influence they have upon others.

(1.) He charges them with it: *You do it*. They did not carry corn, nor sell fish, but, [1.] They connived at those that did, and did not use their power to restrain them, and so made themselves guilty, as those magistrates do who bear the sword in vain. [2.] They set a bad example in other things. If the nobles allowed themselves in sports and recreations, in idle visits and idle talk, on the sabbath day, the men of business, both in city and country, would profane it by their worldly employments, as more justifiable. We must be responsible for the sins which others are led to commit by our example.

(2.) He charges it upon them as an evil thing, for so it is, proceeding from a great contempt of God and our own souls.

(3.) He reasons the case with them (v. 18), and shows them that sabbath breaking was one of the sins for which God had brought judgments upon them, and that if they did not take warning, but returned to the same sins again, they had reason to expect further judgments: *You bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the sabbath*. Thus Ezra concluded, *If we again break thy commandments, wilt not thou be angry with us till thou hast consumed us?* Ezra 9:14.

3. He took care to prevent the profanation of the sabbath, as one that aimed only at reformation. If he could reform them, he would not punish them, and, if he should punish them, it was but that he might reform them. This is an example to magistrates to be heirs of restraint, and prudently to use the bit and bridle, that there may be no occasion for the lash. (1.) He ordered the gates of Jerusalem to be kept shut from the evening before the sabbath to the morning after, and set his own servants (whose care, courage and honesty, he could confide in) to watch them, that no burdens should be brought in on the sabbath day, nor late the night before, nor early in the morning after, lest sabbath time should be encroached upon, v. 19. Those that came in to worship in the courts of the temple were no doubt admitted to pass and repass, but none that came to sell goods; *they* were forced to *lodge without the city* (v. 20), where no doubt they wished the sabbath were gone, that they might sell corn. (2.) He threatened those who came with goods to the gates, who pressed hard for entrance, telling them that, if they came again, he

would certainly lay hands on them (v. 21), and this deterred them from coming any more. Note, If reformers will but put on resolution, more may be done towards the breaking of bad customs than they can imagine. Vice connived at is indeed a daring thing, and will bid defiance to counsel and reproof; but it may be made cowardly, and will be so when magistrates make themselves a terror to it. *The king that sits on the throne of judgment scatters away all evil with his eyes.* (3.) He charged the Levites to take care about the due sanctifying of the sabbath, that they should cleanse themselves in the first place, and so give a good example to the people, and *that they should some of them come and keep the gates*, v. 22. Because he and his servants must shortly return to court, he would leave this charge with some that might abide by it, that not only when he was present, but in his absence, the sabbath might be sanctified. Then there is likely to be a reformation, in this and other respects, when magistrates and ministers join their forces. The courage, zeal, and prudence of Nehemiah in this matter, are here recorded for our imitation; and we have reason to think that the cure he wrought was lasting; for, in our Saviour's time, we find the Jews in the other extreme, over-scrupulous in the ceremonial part of sabbath-sanctification.

4. He concludes this passage with a prayer (v. 22), in which observe, (1.) The petitions: *Remember me* (as the thief on the cross, *Lord, remember me*); that is enough. God's thoughts to us ward are very precious, Ps. 40:5. He adds, *Spare me*. So far is he from thinking that what he had done did properly merit a reward in strict justice that he cries earnestly to God to *spare him*, as Jeremiah (ch. 15:15), *Take me not away in thy long-suffering* (ch. 10:24), *Correct me not in anger*, and (ch. 17:17), *Be not a terror to me*. Note, The best saints, even when they do the best actions, stand in need of *sparing mercy*; for *there is not a just man that doeth good and sinneth not*. (2.) The plea: *According to the greatness* (or multitude) *of thy mercies*. Note, God's mercy is what we must depend upon, and not any merit of our own, when we appear before God.

Verses 23-31

We have here one instance more of Nehemiah's pious zeal for the purifying of his countrymen as a peculiar people to God; that was the thing he aimed at in the use of his power, not the enriching of himself. See here,

I. How they had corrupted themselves by marrying strange wives. This was complained of in Ezra's time, and much done towards a reformation, Ezra 9 and 10. But, when the unclean spirit is cast out, if a watchful eye be not kept upon him, he will re-enter; so he did here. Though in Ezra's time those that had married strange wives were forced to put them away, which could not but occasion trouble and confusion in families, yet others would not take warning. *Nitimur in vetitum—we still lean towards what is forbidden*. Nehemiah, like a good governor, enquired into the state of the families of those that were under his charge, that he might reform what was amiss in them, and so heal the streams by healing the springs. 1. He enquired whence they had their wives, and found that many of the Jews had *married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab* (v. 23), either because they were fond of what was far-fetched or because they hoped by these alliances to strengthen and enrich themselves. See how God by the prophet reproves this, Mal. 2:11. *Judah has dealt treacherously*, and broken covenant with God, the covenant made in Ezra's time with reference to this very thing; he has *profaned the holiness of the Lord by marrying the daughter* (that is, the worshipper) *of a strange god*. 2. He talked with the children, and found they were *children of strangers*, for their *speech betrayed them*. The children were bred up with their mothers, and learned of them and their nurses and

servants to speak, so that they could not speak the Jews' language, could not speak it at all, or not readily, or not purely, but *half in the speech of Ashdod*, or Ammon, or Moab, according as the country was which the mother was a native of. Observe, (1.) Children, in their childhood, learn much of their mothers. *Partus sequitur ventrem—they are prone to imitate their mothers*. (2.) If either side be bad, the corrupt nature will incline the children to take after that, which is a good reason why Christians should not be unequally yoked. (3.) In the education of children great care should be taken about the government of their tongues, that they learn not the language of Ashdod, any impious or impure talk, any corrupt communication.

II. What course Nehemiah took to purge out this corruption, when he discovered how much it had prevailed.

1. He showed them the evil of it, and the obligation he lay under to witness against it. He did not seek an occasion against them, but this was an iniquity to be punished by the judge, and which he must by no means connive at (v. 27): "*Shall we hearken to you*, who endeavour to palliate and excuse it? No, it is an evil, a great evil, it is a *transgression against our God, to marry strange wives*, and we must do our utmost to put a stop to it. You beg that they may not be divorced from you, but we cannot hearken to you, for there is no other remedy to clear us from the guilt and prevent infection." (1.) He quotes a precept, to prove that it was in itself a great sin; and makes them swear to that precept: *You shall not give your daughters unto their sons*, etc., which is taken from Deu. 7:3. When we would reclaim people from sin we must show them the sinfulness of it in the glass of the commandment. (2.) He quotes a precedent, to show the pernicious consequences of it, which made it necessary to be animadverted upon by the government (v. 26): *Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things?* The falls of great and good men are recorded in order that we may take warning by them to shun the temptations which they were overcome by. Solomon was famous for wisdom; there was no king like him for it; yet, when he married strange wives, his wisdom could not secure him from their snares, nay, it departed from him, and he did very foolishly. He was beloved of God, but his marrying strange wives threw him out of God's favour, and went near to extinguish the holy fire of grace in his soul: he was king over all Israel; but his doing this occasioned the loss of ten of his twelve tribes. You plead that you can marry strange wives and yet retain the purity of Israelites; but Solomon himself could not; even *him did outlandish women cause to sin*. Therefore let him that *thinks he stands take heed lest he fall* when he runs upon such a precipice.

2. He showed himself highly displeased at it, that he might awaken them to a due sense of the evil of it: *He contended with them*, v. 25. They offered to justify themselves in what they did, but he showed them how frivolous their excuses were, and argued it warmly with them. When he had silenced them he *cursed them*, that is, he denounced the judgments of God against them, and showed them what their sin deserved. He then picked out some of them that were more obstinate than the rest, and fit to be made examples, and *smote them* (that is, ordered them to be beaten by the proper officers according to the law, Deu. 25:2, 3), to which he added this further mark of infamy that he *plucked off their hair*, or cut or shaved it off; for it may so be understood. Perhaps they had prided themselves in their hair, and therefore he took it off to deform and humble them, and put them to shame; it was, in effect, to stigmatize them, at least for a time. Ezra, in this case, had plucked off his own hair, in holy sorrow for the sin; Nehemiah plucked off their hair, in a holy indignation at the sinners. See the different tempers of wise, and good, and useful men, and the divers graces, as well as divers gifts, of the same Spirit.

3. He obliged them not to take any more such wives, and separated those whom they had taken: *He cleansed them from all strangers*, both men and women (v. 30), and made them promise with an oath that they would never do so again, v. 25. Thus did he try all ways and means to put a stop to this mischief and to prevent another relapse into this disease.

4. He took particular care of the priests' families, that they might not lie under this stain, this guilt. He found, upon enquiry, that a branch of the high priest's own family, one of his grandsons, had married a daughter of Sanballat, that notorious enemy of the Jews (ch. 2:10; 4:1), and so had, in effect, twisted interests with the Samaritans, v. 28. How little love had that man either to God or his country who could make himself in duty and interest a friend to him that was a sworn enemy to both. It seems this young priest would not put away his wife, and therefore Nehemiah *chased him from him*, deprived him, degraded him, and made him for ever incapable of the priesthood. Josephus says that this expelled priest was Manasseh, and that when Nehemiah drove him away he went to his father-in-law Sanballat, who built him a temple upon Mount Gerazim, like that at Jerusalem, and promised him he should be high priest in it, and that then was laid the foundation of the Samaritans' pretensions, which continued warm to our Saviour's time. Jn. 4:20, *Our fathers worshipped in this mountain*. When Nehemiah had thus expelled one that had forfeited the honour of the priesthood he again posted the *priests and Levites every one in his business*, v. 30. It was no loss to them to part with one that was the scandal of their cloth; the work would be done better without him. When Judas had gone out Christ said, *Now is the Son of Man glorified*, Jn. 13:30, 31. Here are Nehemiah's prayers on this occasion. (1.) He prays, *Remember them, O my God!* v. 29. "Lord, convince and convert them; put them in mind of what they should be and do, that they may come to themselves." Or, "Remember them to reckon with them for their sin; remember it against them." If we take it so, this prayer is a prophecy that God would remember it against them. Those that defile the priesthood despise God, and shall be lightly esteemed. Perhaps they were too many and too great for him to deal with. "Lord" (says he), "deal thou with them; take the work into thy own hands." (2.) He prays, *Remember me, O my God!* v. 31. The best services done to the public have sometimes been forgotten by those for whom they were done (Eccl. 9:15); therefore Nehemiah refers it to God to recompense him, takes him for his paymaster, and then doubts not but he shall be well paid. This may well be the summary of our petitions; we need no more to make us happy than this: *Remember me, O my God! for good.*