

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

John Kitto, D.D., F.S.A.

Fifty-Second Week - Wednesday

THE WALLS OF JERUSALEM REBUILT

"And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, that I [Nehemiah] took the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had never been sad in his presence before. Therefore the king said to me, 'Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This is nothing but sorrow of heart.' So I became dreadfully afraid, and said to the king, 'May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire?' Then the king said to me, 'What do you request?' So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it.' Then the king said to me (the queen also sitting beside him), 'How long will your journey be? And when will you return?' So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time" (Nehemiah 2:1-6).

The decree of Cyrus had reference only to the building of the temple. However, in the East it is so important that a town of any consequence should be surrounded by a wall that the Jews reasonably concluded that Cyrus' decree implied permission to build one.

Thirteen years after the arrival of Ezra, the housetops of Jerusalem were now crowded to witness the arrival of a new civil governor, whose high rank and power at court was evinced by the splendid escort of "captains of the army and horsemen" that attended him. It was the king's cup-bearer! Now this title, which sounds so undignified to us, was one which inspired the citizens with the most lofty ideas of power and influence. They felt that surely good days had come since so great a man had deigned to take the government of their poor state and that King Artaxerxes had spared him from his court.

The office of cup-bearer is mentioned by ancient writers as of the highest honor and influence in the great monarchies of the East, the fortunate possessor of which enjoyed great influence from the peculiar facilities afforded him of access to the royal presence. Such a man might aspire to the highest civil or even military employments without presumption. It was the same with the Assyrians. The man who seems to have held the chief command under Sennacherib was Rabshakeh, and his name, or rather title, conveys "chief cup-bearer" to the king.

At the Persian court the expatriated natives of conquered states might aspire to the highest

offices at the court or in the state equally with native Persians. Thus we find this high position of cup-bearer held by Nehemiah, a pious Jew whose patriotic heart felt a deep interest in the welfare of "the city of his fathers' sepulchres." A Jew named Hanani had just come back to the imperial city of Shushan from Jerusalem, and he gave Nehemiah the sad account of the state of affairs there. This afflicted Nehemiah greatly, and he wished to be the honored instrument in repairing the desolation of Zion.

This wish of Nehemiah was not too much to ask the king, but yet there was much danger in the asking. The king was accustomed to seeing him cheerful. Might he not be offended when Nehemiah came in to wait upon him with a sad face? And then again, the king might in a moment of happy humor consent to let him go with the powers of a governor, but might he not demur at the prospect of rebuilding the walls, the very point that was of most importance? In his perplexity and danger, Nehemiah did exactly the right thing. He cast the matter before the Lord in earnest prayer, imploring Him "to give him favor in the sight of this man."

Kings do not like the sight of unhappy faces. It looks like a disparagement of their greatness, an insinuation that they have not the power of conferring universal happiness; and in the Persian court it was a capital crime to appear sad in the king's presence. Nehemiah knew this very well. When he found, therefore, that the lapse of time day-after-day afforded him no suitable opportunity of bringing the matter before the king, he found it hard to keep some traces of sadness from appearing on his face.

King Artaxerxes noticed, but Nehemiah was encouraged to make his request. He then humbly asked for a leave of absence to be sent to Jerusalem with full powers to rebuild its walls. This was granted with the understanding that he was to return within an appointed time. Nehemiah then set forth furnished with the necessary royal letters to the governors west of the Euphrates to facilitate his goal, together with orders for the free supply of materials for the city walls and for the palace which he as governor intended to build for himself.

When Nehemiah arrived he did not at once make known the full extent of his commission. But one moonlit night, the third after his arrival, he went out privately with a few attendants and rode around the outside of the town, making a complete survey of the walls in their ruined state. The next day he said, "Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach!" We may easily imagine the thrill of surprise and joyful excitement these words produced and the zeal they inspired.

No time was lost, and they went to work with vigor. Men of all trades were engaged in the work, the governor and chief persons being always present to encourage them. The danger was great from their old enemies, whose animosity was aroused to a frenzy when they saw the walls going up. All kinds of scoffs and insults were showered upon them, and upon seeing the work proceeding so vigorously they took counsel to put a stop to it by force of arms.

But upon hearing this Nehemiah took remarkable precautions for safety. Everyone was kept on

the alert: "So it was, from that time on, that half of my servants worked at construction, while the other half held the spears, the shields, the bows, and wore armor; and the leaders were behind all the house of Judah. Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction and with the other held a weapon." Nehemiah was constantly present with a trumpeter by his side. When the trumpet sounded the people hastened to him.

These vigilant precautions had the effect intended, and the great work was completed in fifty-two days.