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Notes on the Book of Ezra

by

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PREFATORY NOTE

THAT the book of Ezra contains much-needed truth for the present time is my firm belief. A re-affirmation of early principles is necessary on account of the attempt on the part of many to set aside “that which is written” as to the gathering and fellowship of children of God in separation from evil; and this, because of break-downs on the part of some who sought, through grace, to take a scriptural position years ago. Corporate failure has been supposed (in some way incomprehensible to one who would be guided alone by the word of God) to sanction individual turning from the path of the truth, and thus excuse and palliate what the late W. Kelly very appropriately called “nothingarianism in Church relations,”

No amount of failure alters divine truth. We to-day are as responsible as our fathers were to go back to “that which is written” and act in faith upon it.

It is true difficulties and perplexities abound as might be expected, because of the near close of the dispensation. But “God and the word of His grace ” are still all-sufficient for every peril or disaster. A careful study of the books

of Ezra and Nehemiah would, I feel certain, preserve from a gloomy pessimism as to the carrying out of the truth of gathering to the Name of the Lord and furnish many needed warnings against the abounding snares of the last times.

This little book has been written far away from the opportunities of consulting the writings of others, while laboring in the gospel among the Pueblo Indians. Here in the wilderness the same blessed work is going on among our red -skinned fellow -believers, of making Christ the one only Centre. The principles put before them, and blessed to the souls of many, are, in this brief exposition, presented for the consideration afresh of those older in the truth.

I should add that while, as noted above, unable now to consult the works of others, I have in times past read several expositions of Ezra with profit, and, no doubt, much suggested in their writings now appears in this work. "We can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth." That what is of God may prevail, is my earnest desire ; and to forward this, is my only object in sending out these unpretentious pages, which are now committed to the care of "the Spirit of truth" in the worthy name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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NOTES
ON
THE BOOK OF EZRA

CHAPTER I

Separated Vessels

THERE are seven Old Testament books most intimately linked together;—three historical, three prophetic and one both historical and prophetic, I refer to Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther in the first group, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi in the second; and Daniel standing alone as the third.* All have to do largely with a special work of God, subsequent to the close of the seventy years' captivity predicted by Jeremiah in which the land of Palestine was to make up her lost sabbatic years (Jer. 25:11-14; 2 Chron. 36: 21; Dan. 9: 2). During this period of desolation her people were in bondage to the

* I have previously sent forth a little book called "Notes on the Book of Esther," and have published a volume of "Lectures on the Book of Daniel." The three post-captivity prophets are in measure expounded in my "Notes on the Minor Prophets." If God will, a volume on "Nehemiah" will follow the present work.

king of Babylon first, and after his overthrow, to the king of Persia. Babylon was the fountain-head of idolatry, and in its false worship, demon-inspired, was found in germ every evil teaching that Satanic ingenuity has ever devised for the turning away of unbelieving men from the revelation given by God in His holy Word.

It was to cure the people of Judah of their deeply-rooted love for idolatry that Jehovah gave them up to serve the Chaldeans, "that bitter and hasty nation." Dwelling in the midst of the heathen, surrounded on all sides by the detestable creations of the human mind energized by wicked spirits, they learned to the full the folly and wretchedness of forsaking "the Guide of their youth" for the "gods many and lords many" of the nations. Their experiences in this stronghold of paganistic corruption cured them effectually of the worship of images, and resulted in a gracious revival under God's good hand which gave to His word a place of importance in their souls that it had not previously held. Unhappily, this blessed work of God's Spirit soon lost its power and degenerated into a mere cold intellectual bibliolatry, in which the letter of the Word was clung to tenaciously while the spirit was quite ignored. So devoted were the Pharisaic successors of "the men of the great synagogue" (as Ezra and his companions were afterwards called) to the study of the sacred

writings, that they even counted the words and letters of the law, while a great body of expository literature was produced, most of it pedantic and imaginative in the extreme, but all testifying to the veneration in which the Scriptures were held. Yet when He who is Himself the Spirit of the entire Old Testament, and of whom Moses and all the prophets wrote, appeared in their midst, He was not discerned by faith and was rejected and crucified by the descendants of the very remnant whose zeal for God is commended in the book of Ezra. Though He came in fulfilment of the very writings they read every Sabbath in public, and often in private, as the Babe of Bethlehem Ephrata, the Light of Galilee of the nations, and the lowly Prince of Peace riding upon an ass, they fulfilled other prophecies in rejecting Him and spurning His claims.

As a result of this stupendous blunder, in a day yet to come and now undoubtedly drawn very near, the mass of the Jews are to sink to a lower form of idolatry than ever, when they receive and own the Antichrist of the future as Messiah of Israel and minister of "a god whom their fathers knew not," the Roman Beast who will be worshiped by the apostate Jews and Christendom alike as "the god of forces" (Dan. 11 : 36 to end; Rev. 13).

This perversion of the word of God and insensibility to the Spirit's work is exceedingly solemn,

and may well have a voice for saints of God in this last end of the present dispensation of His grace, who have been largely delivered from Romish abominations and Protestant misconceptions of Scripture, and brought again to own in simplicity the headship of Christ, the presidency of the Holy Spirit in the Church, and the authority of the written Word over the consciences of all who call upon the name of the Lord. Here also there is grave danger of holding fast the letter, while losing sight of the tremendous importance of walking in the Spirit in living, realized fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ, to whose peerless name God would gather all His own. Already a declension of no slight character has come in, and against those who seek to hold fast the Word and not deny the one *only* Name, the world, the flesh and the devil have combined to render powerless the testimony to the failure of the Church at large, and the abiding unity of the body of Christ.

It cannot therefore be other than salutary to prayerfully trace again some of God's dealings with a remnant of old, that we may learn afresh His mind for His people to-day. In this spirit we would turn to the record of Ezra the scribe, a portion of Holy Scripture of intensely practical character, and abounding with suggestive teaching for believers in all ages.

The first two and a half verses of chapter one are quoted from the ending of 2 Chron., thus suggesting that Ezra was, perhaps, the chosen instrument to complete the earlier record, and which God would not have concluded without a pledge of restoration.

But these first verses of Ezra are not really the beginning of the work of God of which he treats. The true starting point will be found in the 9th of Daniel. There we find a man of God on his knees over the word of God—a lovely sight and one that ever foretells coming blessing. There are three 9th chapters in this series of books that are in large measure of the same character, namely, the 9th of Ezra, of Nehemiah and of Daniel. In all three alike we have men, each one whose heart is under the power of the truth for his times, in the place of confession before God. Such an attitude of soul well becomes all who recognize in any degree the advancing apostasy and the growth of the spirit of insubjection to the Holy Scriptures now so prevalent.

In Daniel's case, "he understood by books" that the seventy years of affliction were very nearly run. He was a student of prophecy, and as he pored over Jeremiah's serious messages, he recognized that the time for their fulfilment of the Word as to the restoration had drawn near. What is the result? It drives him to his knees. He was no mere intellectual Bible student like so

many to-day. The Scriptures had power over his soul and brought him to prayer and confession. He made the approaching deliverance a matter of earnest supplication coupled with a self-judgment that was the outcome of being in the realized presence of God. He confessed his own sin and the sin of his people. There was no harsh criticism of others while congratulating himself on his own faithfulness. He had been faithful, no doubt, but he does not claim anything on that ground. He confesses the failure of the nation to which he belongs and acknowledges their sin as his own. "*We* have sinned" is his cry, not "*they* have sinned."

And what is the happy outcome of all this ? We get it in the beginning of Ezra. "Now in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia " (ver. 1). Thus had God begun to hear and answer His servant's prayer, in fulfilment of His own word given through Jeremiah.

People are often stumbled as to the relations of prayer and the purpose of God. If God has counseled, shall He not bring it to pass, whether we pray or not? The answer is that prayer is a part of God's purpose. He has willed to act when His people pray; and one of the first evidences that He is about to perform a certain

thing is that the spirit of prayer and supplication is poured out upon His people in regard to that particular work. Here He moves the heart of a king in his palace to accomplish His word, after Daniel has made it a matter of prayer.

Cyrus issues a decree saying, “The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and He hath charged me to build Him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all His people? His God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is the God), which is in Jerusalem. And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem ” (vers. 2-4).

In the beginning of this proclamation we see how evidently Cyrus was inspired of the Lord in the very title given to Jehovah. He is the “God of heaven.” This is the name by which He is largely known in the series of books indicated above. It was a title He took when His throne was removed from the earth, and He gave His people into the hands of the Gentiles. He went ~~and~~ “returned to His place,” as Hosea puts it. He forsook the temple at Jerusalem, dissolved the theocracy and became “the God of heaven.”

Such He is still to His ancient people, and so He will remain till He returns to Jerusalem to establish His throne again as “the Lord of the whole earth.”

It is likewise of note that Cyrus issues no *command* for any one to return to Jerusalem. There is to be nothing legal in this movement. It must be the result of grace working in the soul. So the king gives permission, and all who have heart for it are free to go up to the place where of old the Lord had set His name.

For nature there was little indeed to attract any one to Jerusalem. It lay a burned, ruined heap in the midst of a land of desolation. But for faith there was an attraction which nature could not understand. It was the city of God, the place of the Name, the only place on earth to which a grateful people could scripturally bring their offerings and where the guilty could bring a sacrifice for sin.

For believers now there is no such hallowed spot in this scene; “Neither in Jerusalem, nor at this mountain” is our place of worship. But our Lord has said: “Where two or three are gathered together unto My name, there am I in the midst.” Where He is acknowledged **as** sole Head and Lord and His redeemed are gathered to Himself, is what answers to the place where He set His name of old. As so gathered He leads His saints into the heavenly sanctuary, and there draws out their

hearts to offer the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. To get back to this simplicity, as it was at the beginning, may well be the desire of our hearts. Ever since the rising light of the Reformation there have been such stirrings of heart and conscience among the children of God;—yearnings after more of the simplicity of early days, with a larger appreciation of Christ, a separation from the unholy and profane.

It would be a grave blunder to make the scenes of Ezra typical of any one movement in Christendom. It rather has suggestive lessons by which saints may profit when any special work of gathering back to Christ in the Spirit's power is going on. And this is one of the **first and most** important lessons. Such a movement must be of the working of grace. It cannot be a legal thing or all its freshness and power are lost. Hence the unwisdom of trying to force people into a position where grace has not been drawing them,

It is customary in some quarters to rail against human systems and to put the leaving them on **people's** consciences as a matter of duty. By this means many take an outward place of separation who are not really drawn to *Christ*. It follows ~~that~~ such are very likely to be hard and legal in their ways and words, and will know little of that stirring of heart and attraction to the Lord Himself that we have pictured here in Ezra. The 5th verse tells us that certain of the

chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, together with priests and Levites, and “all them whose spirit God had awakened,” arose “to go up to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem.” This was most precious to God. The voluntariness was a lovely evidence of grace working in their souls.

Some there were, perhaps the majority, who did not go up, and it is not for us to judge them as to this; for we cannot tell what natural hindrances there may have been. But the book of Esther is witness that God did not take the same pleasure in those who remained as in the company who “for the Name’s sake” ascended to Jerusalem. He watched over them still, but He did not link His name openly with them as He did with the rest.

There was no enmity or spirit of judgment between the two classes. Those who remained helped their brethren who went up “with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things beside all that was willingly offered ” (ver. 6).

The action of Cyrus to which our attention is next directed, in separating the vessels that had of old belonged to Jehovah’s temple, from the treasure of the kings devoted to the heathen deities, is most suggestive, reminding us of the word of the Lord in 2 Tim. as to separating between vessels to honor and vessels to dishonor.

What was of and for God must be purged out from the mixture. And this remains true for to-day.

The separated vessels are all numbered and committed to Sheshbazzar, called generally Zerubbabel (a stranger in Babel) the prince of Judah. It is noteworthy that this prince of David's line claims no honors by virtue of his illustrious descent. It was a day of weakness and of small things. Zerubbabel therefore takes his place as one whose faith others can follow, but he claims nothing as David's son and heir.

This may speak to the hearts of those who to-day are exercised as to the lack of sign-gifts and who desire something great that the eye may see. The time for great things is over, the dispensation is closing in failure on man's part as to all committed to him. It becomes those who really "have understanding of the times" to be through with pretension, and in simplicity to go along with the lowly. "The meek will He guide in judgment; the meek will He teach His way."

CHAPTER II.

Back to the Place of the Name

IT is to a sample-page from the books of eternity that we are next introduced. A leaf out of God's memorial record is spread before us for our inspection. Similar specimen lists are given us in other parts of the book of God. Gen. 49 is one. The two accounts of David's mighty men, as set forth in 2 Sam. and in 1 Chron., are of the same character. In Neh. 3 (and also in 7, where this 2nd of Ezra is duplicated), God shows how carefully He was taking note of each individual, each family, and the work they accomplished for Him. Rom. 16 is much on the same line, though at first sight only a chapter of apostolic greetings, and in Heb. 11 we have an honor-roll that shall yet be consulted at the judgment-seat of Christ.

There is something peculiarly solemn about records such as these. Many, yea, most of the names in them are for us only names, but God has not forgotten one of the persons once called by these names on earth, and "in that day" He will reward according to the work of each. Some too must "suffer loss" for opportunities neglected, or half-hearted service. Nothing of good or ill shall be overlooked by Him who seeth not as man seeth, who looks not on the outward appearance but on the heart. How little did any of these

devoted Jews of Ezra's day think that God would preserve a registry of their names and families for future generations to read, and thus to learn how highly He values all that is done from devotion of heart to Himself and for the glory of His name!

"Now these are the children of the province that went up out of the captivity, of those which had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away unto Babylon, and came again unto Jerusalem and Judah, every one unto his city " (ver. 1). And then follows the long list of forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty, besides their servants and two hundred choristers (vers. 64, 65). Even the number of their beasts of burden is recorded, for God takes note of all that may be connected with His people, if only in a temporal way (vers. 66, 67).

As one's eye runs down the list of Hebrew names, there are many that stand out in a special way, and some have most suggestive comments attached.

In verse 2 we read both of a Nehemiah and a Mordecai: but the first must not be confounded with the writer of the next book, who came up later, after the re-building of the temple, and in accordance with the "commandment to restore and build Jerusalem," mentioned as the starting point of the seventy heptads of Dan. g: 24. Nor should the record be identified with the aged

consin of Queen Esther, who remained in the city of Shushan, and so far as we know, never went up to Jerusalem after being carried away as a child (Esther 2:5, 6).

“The men of Anathoth,” of verse 23, recalls Jeremiah’s purchase of the field of Anathoth, so long before, and the sealed title-deeds awaiting their lawful claimant. It looked like the height of folly to purchase a field in a doomed district; but faith looked on to the restoration, and now the long-expected day had come when the sealed scroll would prove of real value (Jer. 32).

It is noticeable that so few Levites went up at this time (ver. 40). Only seventy-four ! A small company indeed, and what wonder if we look only at the human side of it. They were to have no inheritance save in the Lord. He alone must be their portion. But it took genuine faith to enable these dear servants of God to count upon His abundant resources at a time when neither wealth nor prestige were found among His remnant people. That a time of testing had soon to be faced we may see by consulting Neh. 13: 10. If God’s people are going on with Him His servants will not be neglected, however little there may seem to be for sight to look upon. And on the other hand, if the people of the Lord do prove forgetful, it is for the servant to realize the more his dependence on God Himself-not on saints, however amiable and benevolent.

There were more of the children of Asaph, the temple singers, than of the Levites in Zerubbabel's company (ver. 41). Of them one hundred and twenty-eight went up. The spirit of praise supports the soul and easily passes over rough ways.

Some there were who could not show their genealogy. "These were they that went up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsa, Cherub, Addan and Immer: but they could not show their father's house and their seed, whether they were of Israel: the children of Delaiah, the children of Tobiah, the children of Nekoda, six hundred fifty and two" (vers. 59, 60). They formed a large company, but there was an uncertainty about their origin which was perplexing indeed. And, alas, of how many in Christendom to-day is this the case ! Characterized by zeal and earnestness often, they are yet quite unable to give a clear, scriptural answer for the hope that is in them. We need to beware of passing hasty judgment on such people; but, on the other hand, a degree of care and caution is needed, that is often resented, but which godly concern for what is dear to Christ demands.

Even of the priests, of whom more than a thousand went up (vers. 36-39), were there found some who could not fully establish their title to serve in Jehovah's temple. "Of the children of the priests: the children of Habaiah, the children of Koz, the children of Barzillai,

who took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called after their name: these sought their register among those that were recorded by genealogy, but they were not found: therefore were they, as polluted, put from the priesthood, and the Tirshatha (Governor) said unto them, that they should not eat of the most holy things, till there stood up a priest with Urim and with Thummim" (vers. 61-63). These were not declared positively to be laying false claim to the priestly title; they were simply set to one side because they could not prove it, until an inspired priest should rise up who could speak with authority.

So we may well treat some now, who cannot trace their genealogy, but nevertheless insist on the Christian place as rightfully theirs. We dare not say they are not born of God-and those who do so essay to speak are guilty of gross presumption; but we cannot own them as such till they can give clear evidence of being indeed of the priestly company and partakers of the divine nature. We can in such case but fall back upon the word, "The Lord knoweth them that are His," and wait until our Great Priest shall Himself pronounce authoritatively as regards them. Till then, we dare not give them the full Christian place; and if they resent the seeming discourtesy, it but indicates a state of soul that calls for self-judgment and repentance.

The 68th and 69th verses show that God was taking note of what was given with a willing heart “for the house of God to set it up in its place.” And when the journey was ended, and the returned company stood upon the site of the ruined city where the Lord had set His name, the desolation did not lead to despair, but stirred afresh the hearts of “some of the chief of the fathers,” who “gave after their ability” of both silver and gold and garments for the priests. And all this ere even the altar had been set upon its base. It was a gracious work, surely, and evidenced the healthful spiritual state of these aged men, who longed to see the temple rise from its ashes ere being called hence.

It is to be feared that very few Christians are faithful in giving after their ability. The rule laid down in 1 Cor. 16: 2, “**Upon** the first day of the week, let each one of you lay by him in store *as God hath prospered him,*” is one that seldom claims a second thought with many. At the weekly gathering a coin is dropped in the box, often with no previous forethought, and certainly not as a result of a prayerful laying by at home according as God has prospered the giver during the past week. Were this generally acted upon, there would be no dearth of means to carry on the work of the Lord in the home and foreign fields, nor any lack of provision for the poor among the saints. God will never forget that

these fathers of old gave according to their ability. Will He forget that many have done nothing of the kind?

Verse 70 closes the chapter with the statement that the priests and Levites, the singers and porters, and the Nethinims* dwelt in their cities, "and all Israel in their cities." Who would have expected to read of "all Israel" at such a time as this? Yet God sees in this weak and feeble remnant a company occupying the ground of all Israel, and He refuses to consider the nation other than in its unity.

So to-day, it is not possible to re-gather the whole Church of God in one outward visible unity. But it *is* possible for a feeble few to meet on the ground of the Church of God, refusing all sectarian names and ways, "endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." The last phrase must never be forgotten. When strife and discord come in, the unity of the Spirit is at once violated. It can never be forced. It is a practical thing, maintained alone as believers walk in the Spirit and recognize in each other all that is of God, while each one individually seeks to "follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord."

* A word of uncertain meaning; they are supposed by many to be the descendants of the wily Gibeonites.

In no other way can the unity of the Spirit be truly kept. The unity of the body of Christ is in no sense in our keeping. "There is one body"-only one; and no failure on man's part can alter that. But we are responsible to act on the ground of that one body, in accordance with the Word, "The loaf which we break is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" (1 Cor. 10: 16.) Thus in the very act of breaking bread at the table of the Lord, we set forth our unity as members of the one body. Why should we then recognize any other body-any narrower circle?

In principle, Christian fellowship, to be scriptural, must embrace all believers; but just as of old there were those whose register could not be found, so now there are many whom one dare not say are not believers, with whom those who would maintain the truth of God cannot have fellowship, because of their doctrine or manner of life. And under this latter heading must be included the being partakers of other men's sins, by associating with what is unholy and defiling. It is here that faith is tested; for only godly discernment can enable saints to act consistently without human rules and regulations, owning all fellow-members of Christ's body, but walking only with those who, following "righteousness, faith, love, peace, call on the Lord out of a pure heart" (2 Tim. 2: 19-22).

CHAPTER III

The Altar and the House

THERE is an evident hiatus to be understood between chapter 2 and 3; but of how long a time we have no record. Doubtless there were weeks, or possibly months, of earnest labor, in which the returned remnant builded homes for themselves, and made preparations for the re-building of the desolated temple by clearing away the rubbish and debris that marked the impiety of the Babylonian conqueror.

At last the seventh month, the month in which the Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated of old, had been reached, and it was decided to set up the altar of Jehovah at once, and with the word of God as their only guide to seek to carry out the instructions as to its observance. There could be nothing so grand nor so stable as of old, but it would be of the same order; and the Word was as truly sufficient for direction and "instruction in righteousness" as in the palmiest days of the fathers.

There was no thought of substituting human expediency for what God had spoken through Moses in the distant past. No one was called on for ideas or suggestions as to the most suitable way to act in these their adverse circumstances, and under such different conditions to those of

old. They simply searched the Scriptures, and when "they found it written," that was an end of controversy. The Bible was their authority; expediency was barred out.

This is a principle of all importance to any who to-day value the divine approbation above the approval of carnal men. The Scriptures are all-sufficient still. They contain all the instruction needed for the guidance of those who would be faithful to God in any particular period of the Church's history. The moment expediency usurps the place of subjection to the revealed will of the Lord, the whole principle of faith is given up, and a walk by sight takes its place. For we cannot walk by faith except as we yield unhesitating obedience to the word of God, which leaves no place for human will or human arrangements.

In the first verse of this lovely chapter we have a beautiful picture of that unity which should ever characterize the children of God. "And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in their cities, the people gathered themselves together as one *man* to Jerusalem." This is indeed blessed. "Behold how good and how pleasant a thing it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! ... There the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore " (Ps. 133). It is of this we have an example, delightful to contemplate, in the case

before us. The people were gathered together as one man to the place of the Name ; and in full accordance with the psalm just quoted from, “The Lord commanded the blessing.” Of this the balance of the chapter affords ample proof. It was fulfilled again in wondrous measure at the beginning of the Church’s history: “When the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place ” (Acts 2: 1). And what was the happy result ? Nothing less than the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the baptism whereby the one body was formed, the conversion of three thousand persons, and the edification of the whole company, while the name of the crucified Jesus was with great power magnified and lauded.

When we look back to the Church’s natal day, and contrast the sweet and holy unity then manifested, with the heart-breaking divisions and cruel separations now seen among Christians, we may well weep and cry, “O Lord, how long? ”

Heal all these schisms we cannot; but we can judge the whole thing as of the flesh, and, turning from all we learn to be contrary to the mind of God, cease to own any narrower body than the body of Christ; refuse allegiance to any other head than Him who sits at God’s right hand; and, while gathering back to the one only Name—turning away from all that bears the Babylonian ~~trade~~ mark—open our hearts, “to all who call

upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both theirs and ours," and thus, in obedience to the word of God, we may yet "endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

So stirring a theme tempts us to wander from our subject, but space and time alike forbid; so we turn back to consider what is further presented for our learning and admonition in the verses that follow.

The altar of the God of Israel (not of the few re-gathered ones, be it noted-but of the whole nation which, though scattered and peeled, is seen by faith in its integrity), was rebuilt by Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brethren the priests, together with Zerubbabel and his brethren of the Davidic line. The testimony *is* both priestly and royal, even as Christians, whatever their weakness, are called of God a holy and royal priesthood, to worship in reverence and to show forth the praises of Him who has called us by His glories and virtue.

The rebuilding of the altar answers to the establishment of believers in the fundamental truths connected with the person and work of the Son of God. "We have an altar whereof they have no right to eat who serve the tabernacle" (Heb. 13: 10). Christ Himself is our altar, for as of old it was the altar that sanctified the gift, so was it the perfection of Christ personally that gave all the value to His work. Therefore,

in any true recovery of the Spirit's inditing, it will always be found that Christ Jesus and His atonement are magnified. True revival there cannot be if He is not the soul's object.

The altar established upon its basis-answering to the truth as to Christ and His work, set forth in accordance with the Word of God-the morning and evening sacrifices or burnt offerings were, without any delay, re-instituted. Now the burnt offering speaks of Christ offering Himself without spot unto God, an offering and sacrifice of a sweet-smelling savor, as contrasted with the sin and trespass offering, wherein Christ made sins is set forth. As the highest offering, it speaks of the believer's heart-felt appreciation of what Christ and His work were and are to God, leading to worship in spirit and in truth. Surely all is here in perfect and lovely accord. If the Lord Jesus be Himself before the soul, and His work be rested in, there can but be unceasing worship and adoration ascending in His name to the Father.

For the Christian, the Lord's table should ever be linked with thoughts such as these. It is in a most distinctive way the eucharistic feast-a festival of thanksgiving in grateful acknowledgment of what our Lord in infinite grace has accomplished, and of the Spirit's delight in contemplating the excellencies of His glorious person. Where this is indeed the case, participation

in the Lord's supper can never be a matter of legal, ritual, or lifeless form. It will be with a holy, chastened joy that the redeemed of the Lord will be found gathered by the Spirit to the precious name of Jesus, now made Lord and Christ, to remember Him.

The alacrity with which the remnant of Judah set about re-establishing the daily offerings and the set feasts is most refreshing to contemplate. There was a holy eagerness, a godly enthusiasm, to walk in the old paths which is delightful to dwell upon.

The feast of tabernacles was kept "as it is written," and all the appointed burnt offerings made "according to the custom, as the duty of every day required" (ver. 4). There were apparently none to object that it was folly at so late a day to attempt to pattern all "according to the custom" of the early days of their glorious history. Had there been such an one, he would have been met by the firm, decided answer and rebuke, "It is written." And for each believer this should ever be enough, outweighing all carnal suggestions, modern notions and unscriptural innovations.

The continual burnt offering, the special sacrifices of the new moons, and all the set feasts were properly provided for ; and when willing hearts suggested at any time special thank offerings to the Lord, priestly hands were ever ready

to attend to the temple requirements as Moses in the book of the law had given commandment.

And all this before the house itself was built, even as there must first be true appreciation of Christ Himself and delight in His work ere there can be any proper entering into the truth of the house of God. The offerings began on the first day of the seventh month, but the work had not yet progressed far enough for the laying of the foundation of the house of the Lord. Indeed some nine months must have elapsed ere this house was properly begun (see ver. 8). But conjointly, we judge, with the setting up of the altar on its bases, money was given to the masons and carpenters, and full provision made to care for the temporal needs of those who were to bring cedar trees and rebuild the house, "according to the grant that they had of Cyrus, king of Persia " (ver. 7).

In the 8th verse, the date of the laying the foundation is given. It is said to be "in the second year of *their* coming to *the house* of God at *Jerusalem*, in the second month," that the work of setting forward the house of the Lord began. They had come "to the house of God," though to sense and sight there was only a blackened ruin before them! What a withering rebuke is this to man's unbelief. All that is of God abides, however we may fail in maintaining it.

We often speak, and rightly, of the truth as to

the Church being lost for over a thousand years after Romish usurpation and Judaistic legality had made the special ministry of Paul to be all but forgotten. But though the truth might be lost, so far as man's apprehension of it was concerned, the fact of the Church-both as the body of Christ and the house of God-remained, though only to be recovered to the knowledge and heart of God's people when faithful men turned from human traditionalism to Christ Himself, and from human authorization to the Word alone. Then how soon did the Spirit begin to work in revealing the long-lost truth as to God's habitation, "The house of **God**, which **is the Church of** the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.. "

The truth as to all this can never be known in power in one's soul so long as practices and systems contrary to God's revealed will are tolerated or endorsed. Hence is it true that the best view of all ecclesiastical systems is to be had outside of them, when the believer can take his stand in simplicity with God's Word open in his hand and discern what is according to His mind, and what is but the product of the human will and fleshly energy. Then also can the outlines of the foundations of the house of God be discerned, and grace found to act in accordance with the truth now learned.

For we are not called to rebuild the Church.

Such has been the vain dream of more than one great mind, only to result in a rude awakening as the ruin became worse than ever. We are simply called to get back to what is written, and act on the truth as though the ruin had never come in, while yet recognizing our feebleness and dependence.

Where there is fellowship in this, it is most blessed; and this leads us to notice a word for our times, found in this and the next chapter. I refer to the fellowship-word “together,” which we have already noticed in verse 1. In *verse 9* we read: “Then stood Jeshua with his sons and his brethren, Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, *together*, to set forward the workmen in the house of God.” Here are “laborers together.” Then in verses 10 and 11, after telling of the priests, Levites, and the sons of Asaph standing in rank in their apparel, “when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord,” we learn that “they sang *together* by course in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord; because He is good, for His mercy endureth forever toward Israel.” Here they are praising together, each heart as one with every other, employed in exalting the loving-kindness of the Lord.

In the next chapter, verse 3, Zerubbabel and the rest, in answer to the Samaritans’ offer of assistance, say : “We ourselves *together* will

build unto the Lord. " Thus they are builders together, raising the walls of the temple in holy, happy fellowship, and in separation from the unclean. And so would God ever have His people going on together, remembering that they have been " called unto the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1: 9).

Turning again to verse 11, we note how the people were stirred when at last the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. In their godly exaltation at this slight measure of recovery, they " shouted with a great shout."

But all were not so exuberant, for " many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of *this* house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy: so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off" (vers. 12, 13).

Youth is the period of enthusiasm and exuberance of spirit, while age is the time of sobriety and serious contemplation. Young men are apt to be over-sanguine looking on to the future ; aged men, on the other hand, are likely to be reminiscent and unduly occupied with the past. It is often difficult for youth to comprehend the fears of the old and experienced regarding any

new work in which they are involved. It is equally hard, frequently, for the elder men to recognize any special work of God entrusted chiefly to the young and in which they cannot share for long. They are too apt to forget their own youth; and as they think of ruined hopes would put the brake on any who do not now occupy their standpoint. Hence much patience is ever needed in a movement such as we have been tracing. The young need grace to profit by the godly, sober counsels of the fathers, who, in their turn, need grace to rejoice in what God is doing through those as yet immature.

Critical, fault-finding old men, even though devoted saints, may be a great hindrance to young brethren, ardent in faith and love till chilled by continual carping or objecting on the part of their elders. On the other hand, cheery, fatherly brethren, who are ever ready to see God's leading in any fresh work of His Spirit, who have grown old gracefully, and are "melting for heaven," as one has put it, can be both helpers and counsellors of great value to their younger brethren.

There is room both for the weeping and the shouting. As we think of the failure of man to carry out, and hold fast, the truth committed to him, we may well shed tears. As we note the matchless grace of God, rising above all failure, and ever raising up a fresh testimony to His

truth in times of declension, we may well shout aloud for joy. The two are not discordant, but blend in one majestic strain, of which the treble is carried by the joyous, youthful shouters, and the bass by the weeping patriarchs-all alike to the praise and glory of the God of all grace, who is also the God of infinite holiness and intrinsic righteousness.

CHAPTER IV

The Adversaries

THE first discordant note in connection with this gracious symphony is struck in the chapter we are now to be occupied with, not however, at first from within, but from without; then affecting those within, so that the song of joy is silenced and a brief season of apathy supervenes.

There were those who, all along, had watched with a jealous eye the work of restoration going on at Jerusalem. They were the Samaritans, the descendants of the mixed races settled in the land by heathen kings after the capture of the ten tribes, who had long ago been carried away to Assyria, and have since been lost so far as positive identification by man is concerned.

We learn something of these conscienceless people by turning back a few pages in our Bibles, to 2 Kings, chap. 17; from ver. 24 to the end we have the record of these men who were brought from the various parts of the Assyrian dominions and settled in the land. At first they made no pretence at being anything but idolaters; but upon becoming alarmed by wild beasts increasing among them, they concluded they needed to know "the manner of the God of the land." Entreating the king of Assyria for help, he sent unto them

some of the captive priests of Jeroboam's order, who "taught them how they should fear the Lord." But the unreality of it all is seen in verses 32 and 33: "So they feared the Lord, and made unto themselves of the lowest of them, priests of the high places, who sacrificed for them in the houses of the high places. They feared the Lord, and served their own gods after the manner of the nations whence they had been carried away." And their subsequent degraded state is depicted in the closing verse, in contrast to what God required of His people Israel.

These Samaritans were largely of the same character as thousands in this day of grace who make a profession of Christianity but have never even pretended to own Christ as Lord, and who know nothing of the saving value of His blood. They, too, fear the Lord, but serve their own gods; and it is a sad mistake for the believer to be linked up with such in Church fellowship. Such "Christians" as these will ever prove a snare and a hindrance, like "the mixed multitude" who came up with the children of Israel out of Egypt.

In the case before us, we learn that "when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity builded the temple unto the Lord God of Israel, then they came to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers, and said unto them, Let us build with

you: for we seek your God, as ye do; and we do sacrifice unto Him since the days of Esar-haddon, king of Assur, who brought us up hither " (vers. 1, 2). Their words sounded friendly, but their true character is given in the opening clause—they were *adversaries*. **They** sought the ruin of the little company to whom they made such fair protestations. These were indeed "the wiles of the devil." Had they once gotten a foothold in the city of God they would have destroyed everything that bore the sign of His approval. To have received and encouraged them would have made the remnant company numerically stronger, but actually much weaker. It would have been admitting the enemy within the fortress. The safety of the people of God was in separation. They were set apart to Him whose name they bore. To mingle with the nations could but insure ruin and disaster.

Note the profession of these Samaritans. They declared that they too served the God of Israel, -but they could not go back far enough. They knew nothing of redemption by blood, nothing of Jehovah's covenant-sign; they had not known God's mighty works. What they knew was mere hearsay, and based on that was an empty acknowledgment of His power, while ignorant of His grace, and no subjection of heart to His will. How like the empty professions one so frequently hears. Men talk glibly of serving the Lord and

having made a start for the kingdom, who know nothing of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ Till such are brought to self-judgment before God, and heart-confidence in Christ as Saviour, they are only a hindrance to any Christian company, and will be adversaries to everything that is really of the Holy Spirit.

Yet the flesh hates to be accounted unfit to take part in what is of God. Natural men, however little place they have for the truth in their souls, resent being given the place the truth puts them in. So here, when Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the ancient men of Judah refused the help of these unholy Samaritans, great indignation was aroused. The leaders in Israel said: "Ye have nothing to do with us to build a house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the Lord God of Israel, as king Cyrus, the king of Persia, hath commanded us " (ver. 3)). The last words show how plainly they recognized their servitude, and felt the difference of present conditions from those of old. But withal there is a splendid boldness, an unequivocal declaration of adherence to the principle of separation, the neglect of which in the past had been responsible for all their troubles. It is the spirit of the 50th psalm-taking sides with God, who says to the wicked, "What hast thou to do to declare My statutes, or that thou shouldst take My covenant in thy mouth ? "

This is divine independence; and only as believers learn to take this attitude toward the Christless profession around them, will they be maintained in integrity and uprightness before God. As a testimony for Him in the world, amalgamation with the ungodly cannot help *them*, and will only hinder saints. "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord; touch not the unclean, and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be My sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty" (2 Cor. 6: 17, 18).

But this always provokes the ire of the wicked, who will ever be ready to make unsubstantiated charges of pride and pharisaism against those who would be faithful to God at whatever cost. So we read: "The people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building, and hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose 'and this not for a brief season, but persistently, "all the days of Cyrus . . . even until the reign of Darius," including the years of Ahasuerus (probably Xerxes).

Thus their real nature is made manifest. If they cannot have a hand in the work, they will do **their** best (or, their worst) to ruin it. They cannot brook the refusal of their offer of fellowship; so, by spreading evil reports and misrepresenting the motives and actions of the separated company, they will hinder all they can. A letter

is even drawn up and dispatched to the king, who is here called Artaxerxes, in which there is just enough truth to make it likely to accomplish its purpose, while the question at issue is not touched upon at all.

From chap. 4: 6 to chap. 6 :18 the language used is Chaldean, or Aramaic; so we have here undoubtedly transcripts of the actual letters that passed between the kings and their subjects.

It is significant that the first letter proceeds not exactly from the "nations" but from the *societies* settled in Canaan. (See vers. 9, 10.) The various names used are rather the names of clans, or guilds, than national designations. The little Jewish company's exclusiveness drew out their hatred.

In their epistle they profess great concern for the king's interests, and grave fears lest his revenues or honor be touched. They charge the Jews with rebuilding Jerusalem, with having set up its walls and joined the foundation (ver. 12). Now all this was flagrantly false, as Nehemiah's record proves. No permission had yet been granted "to restore and build Jerusalem;" and this was not the work in which the remnant were engaged. They were rebuilding the house, or temple-not the city-of God; and their work is wilfully misrepresented.

The past history of Jerusalem is briefly reviewed, at least such part of it as would serve

their purpose, and the charge is confidently made that the restoration of "the rebellious city" will mean the destruction of Persian power "on this side the river" (ver. 16).

The cunningly worded document accomplished its purpose, and a messenger soon returned with an imperial mandate declaring that search had been made, and all the evil accusations against Jerusalem as a centre of rebellion and sedition established. Then an order is given to "cause these men to cease, and that this city be not builded until another commandment shall be given from me" (vers. 17-20).

With this official communication **in their** hands, Rehum and Shimshai and their companions made a hasty visit to Jerusalem and caused the work to cease by force and power. Yet, clearly they acted with no real authority whatever, inasmuch as the matter of carrying out the decree of Cyrus as to the building of the *temple* had not been touched at all. That edict remained unrepealed, and had there been the energy of faith the work of restoring the house of God would have gone on despite the wrath of Rehum and his allies.

But already, first love had begun to wane, and we are told, "Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia" (ver. 24).

During the interval a period of apathy came in, so that the first energy for what was of God declined, and each one began to think rather of his own comfort and the comforts of his family. They turned to building their own ceiled houses, to storing up goods, and to attending carefully to their own interests. Of this the prophet Haggai accuses them. For, it should be noted, the ministry of both Haggai and Zechariah comes in here. The reader might with profit turn from the present account and read thoughtfully the two books bearing their names, ere going on with Ezra's record.

There is no hint of any suffering inflicted by the adversaries of the Jews while they were attending to their own interests. It was *what was of God* these wicked workers hated. To behold those gathered to His name devoting their time and strength to building for themselves excited no enmity, and the enemies' purpose to stop the building of the house of God succeeded.

So it ever is, the world and the world-church are quite content to see Christians prospering in temporal ways. The line of demarkation soon goes down when riches increase and self-interest prevails. It is the *spiritual* prosperity, the energy of *faith*, that offends the world; for when the light shines brightly, it exposes the selfishness, the pride, the hypocrisy of those who have a name to live but are dead.

CHAPTER V

Prophetic Ministry

IT has often been said, and truly, that it is one thing to occupy a right position, and quite another to be in a right condition. The remnant of Judah were in the right position when gathered back to the place of the Name. But we have just seen that they had dropped from the happy state in which they were when they first returned to Jerusalem, and had lapsed into a condition that made them easily disheartened.

What then was the remedy? Give up all and go back to the place they had left? Not at all; for they had God's word for remaining where they were, and He could be depended on to send them suited ministry to arouse and revive that they might thus reach a healthier state.

Yet how often do we see the opposite of this. People learn certain lines of truth from the Word of God, and seek grace to walk in them. To do so involves a special position as gathering alone to the name of the Lord Jesus in separation from what is unholy. But by and by the freshness of early days passes away, and a period of lethargy and apathy succeeds. The love of many waxes cold, and the dew of their youth is gone. What should those do who would be right with God? Forsake the position and go

back to what they once left for Christ's sake ? Surely not; but in the position cry to God for the Spirit's ministry that there may be revival and blessing. Maintain the right position at all costs and cease not looking up to the Head for what each member needs.

But God's eye was on His discouraged people, and in gracious concern for their state, He raised up among them Haggai and Zechariah, both "the Lord's messengers in the Lord's message" (Hag. 1: 13). In the name of the God of Israel these two devoted servants exhorted the remnant to consider their ways, and be strong, or courageous, for they were directly under Jehovah's care as brands plucked from the fire. Haggai dealt more especially with the consciences of the people. His are stirring, cutting words. Zechariah was commissioned to speak more to their hearts, enthusing them to holy boldness in view of the coming glory. Both lines of ministry were needed; for God's people are possessed of conscience and heart, and each must be appealed to.

The immediate result was the stirring of spirit among the leaders. "Then rose up Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and began to build the house of God which is at Jerusalem: and with them were the prophets of God helping them " (ver. 2). Such was the happy effect of this Spirit-given ministry.

And, as might have been expected, their insolent adversaries are once more immediately active. Hardly have trowel and hammer begun to be used in the work of rebuilding or completing the house, when Tatnai, the Samaritan governor, and Shethar-boznai (new names to us), and their companions appear, and indignantly enquire, "Who hath commanded you to build this house?" (ver. 3.) To explain to men like these would have been useless, and would have been but casting pearls before swine. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him," and with no one else. Natural men could not understand a divine call and divine authorization. Therefore Zerubbabel and his helpers made no reference to the prophetic messages which had so stirred their own souls, but simply answered those fools according to their folly. "What are the names of the men that make this building?" they asked in their reply. This was but another way of saying that the business they were concerned in was one in which their questioners had no part or responsibility.

And though persuasion and threats were evidently used, "the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, that they could not cause them to cease, till the matter came to Darius;" and then God so directed the king's heart that he gave an answer of peace and encouragement.

The Darius here mentioned should not be con-

founded with the king of the same name in Daniel 6. This was evidently the successor to Xerxes the Great, while the other was but a vice-king under Cyrus. The splendid reign of Artaxerxes, as he is called in this record, had come to an end, and Darius ascended the throne. To him therefore the enemies of the Jews addressed themselves in a lengthy epistle which, at first sight, is of a much more straightforward character than the one drawn up by Rehum and Shimshai. No false evidence as to rebuilding the city is manufactured, but the simple facts stated that "the house of the great God " was in process of construction, and "the work goeth fast on and prospereth." One point is probably a falsification, in that they say, " We went into the province of Judea," and beheld these things, as though their going there was only casual, without malice aforethought ; whereas, as we know, it was deliberate hostility to the Jews that led them to thus trespass in a district where they had no authority; they were but evil-minded busy-bodies. This they skilfully endeavor to cover, and write as though a mere accident had given them to see what made them fear for the the king's honor.

It is a question whether in the light of verse 4, already noted, they are not drawing on a previous knowledge in putting the lengthy answer into the mouths of the elders which is given in

+ **verses 11 to 16.** All this was actually done, but it hardly seems likely that it was made known to Tatnai and his friends at this particular time. It was, rather, what they had heard when the work first began—the very thing that had rankled in their minds for so long.

They tell how they had questioned these elders as to who had commanded them to build these walls; and then, for very shame, in place of the abrupt and contemptuous reply of the Jews, they tell that (which Zerubbabel apparently did not say) which would have a great effect upon Darius, in throwing him back upon the unalterable decrees of the Persian king.

They declare that an answer was given to this effect: That these builders were the servants of the God of heaven and earth” and were restoring the house which a great king of Israel (whose name is evidently unknown to these plotters) had set up. But after their fathers had provoked the God of heaven unto wrath, He had permitted the Babylonian captivity, under Nebuchadnezzar, by whom the house was destroyed and the people carried away. But declaration had been made of what, to their minds, was evidently a most unheard of and preposterous thing: namely, that in the first year of Cyrus a decree

*** Their addition of the words “and earth ” shows their ignorance of God’s relation with Israel at that time.**

had been given to rebuild this house of God; and that the vessels of that old and destroyed temple had been restored to these Jews with a command given to Sheshbazzar (the Persian name of Zerubbabel), who was reported to have been made governor, to take these vessels and carry them to the temple that is in Jerusalem, and "let the house of God be builded in his place." Accordingly the said Sheshbazzar had come to Jerusalem and laid the foundation, and (here followed clear prevarication) "since that time even until now hath it been in building" (as though in contravention of the decree of Artaxerxes, which they supposed fully covered the case), "and yet it is not finished."

These busy-bodies evidently felt sure that this entire report was without authentic foundation, so they urged that search be made to see if such a decree had ever been issued by king Cyrus, and loyally concluded, "Let the king send his pleasure to us concerning this matter" (ver. 17).

And so their letter was drawn up and despatched; and doubtless they felt assured that the king's reply would put an effectual **quietus** upon the work of these obnoxious Jews, and forever stop the erection of a building which was as a sermon directed against their evil and idolatrous ways.

Meantime the work went right on, "for the people had a mind to build," as we elsewhere

read and the prophets of the Lord encouraged them in carrying out His revealed will, in holy independence of their active and crafty adversaries.

The result could not be in doubt, for God *never* fails faith. He always makes bare His arm on behalf of those who acknowledge the authority of His Word, He has said, “ Them that honor Me I will honor, and they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed.”

All that is needed is the faith that fears not the face of man, because the *fear* of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom is upon the soul.

CHAPTER VI

The House Completed

THAT God never fails an obedient and trusting people is preciously exemplified in this stirring chapter of His ways with the separated remnant of the Jews.

As when, in the book of Esther, the search of the royal records but vindicated Mordecai and led to the confusion of Haman, so here, when “search was made in the house of the rolls, where the treasures were laid up in Babylon, there was found at Achmetha, in the palace that is in the province of the Medes, a roll,” in which was found the record of king Cyrus, containing the very decree cynically referred to in the epistle of Tatnai and Shethar-boznai. There the command that the house be builded was plainly declared, together with the specifications and plans, and the order for returning the vessels of the house of God from among the pollutions of heathen idolatry to their proper home in Jerusalem, the city where Jehovah had put His name (vers. 1-5).

King Darius accordingly wrote at once warning Tatnai and his confederates to “let the work of this house of God alone ; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God in his place ” (vers. 6, 7).

This stinging rebuke was all that these enemies of the Jews and professed loyalists to the king got for their pains. Nay, there was even greater humiliation than this for them. The decree went on to command what they should do to further this work: "That of the king's goods, even of the tribute beyond the river, forthwith expenses be given unto these men, that they be not hindered; and that which they have need of, both young bullocks and rams and lambs for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the appointment of the priests that are at Jerusalem, let it be given them day by day without fail: that they may offer sacrifices of sweet savors unto the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king, and of his sons" (vers. 8-10). Moreover, it was directed, that if any one dared in any way to contravene this decree, his house was to be made a dunghill, and he himself hanged upon a scaffold made of its timbers (ver. 11).

We must remember that all this was the decree of a king, who, whatever the measure of his enlightenment (as a Persian disdaining the idols of the Babylonians), nevertheless gives no evidence of that direct inspiration of God which is declared to have been the case in regard to Cyrus and his commandment; he was definitely raised up of God, and designated before his birth by name (Isa. 44:28), and as "the righteous man

from the east " who was to fulfil Jehovah's will as to the restoration of His people (Isa. 41: 2). With Darius it was otherwise. He writes as one who had great respect for the decrees of his predecessors, and he will therefore invoke fearful penalties on any who venture to act contrary to them.

The last part of his letter is such as we might expect from a king of his character, under the circumstances that had arisen: "And the God that hath caused His name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem " (ver. 1 2). It is a solemn fact that this curse was literally fulfilled in every instance, Antiochus defiled this house and died unnaturally under the anger of God. Herod presumed to alter and enlarge it for his own aggrandizement, and died under divine displeasure. The Romans utterly destroyed it when the days of grace for Israel had expired; but in doing so, sealed their own doom, and their mighty empire is to-day but a memory.

The celerity with which the humbled and astonished Tatnai and his friends undertook to carry out the provisions of the decree must have been a great relief to the hitherto despised jews. It reminds one of the Lord's words to another feeble remnant, the church of Philadelphia, who had a little strength and kept

Christ's word, not denying His name. To them then He says: "Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee " (Rev. 3 : 9).

What is really of God may be despised for the moment by the unsubject and hypocritical, but the day of manifestation ever shows where the Lord has found His pleasure. Not always does this manifestation take place on earth, but in the day of Christ all that God has owned will be made plain. Yet, even here, often He shows where He has set the seal of His approval, to the discomfiture of haughty pretenders to an authority and spirituality they do not possess.

Happily, we see no evidence of carnal exultation or of haughtiness of spirit on the part of Zerubbabel and his fellow-laborers over the exposure and humbling of their opponents. Rather do we see a sincere cleaving to the Lord and rejoicing in Him who has made their mountain to stand strong. It was His work they were concerned in, not their own vindication. So, in holy serenity, "the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo" (ver. 14).

I would call the reader's attention to the designations given these servants of God, now for

the second time. Haggai is called “the prophet” as though pre-eminently that, while his companion-servant is simply declared to be “the son of Iddo.” Yet, as men generally speak, the latter it is who possesses the fullest claim to the prophetic office; for he unfolds in a wonderful manner the future in store for Israel and Judah. And this opening up of the unseen future is what is generally called prophecy. But it is otherwise in the word of God. The true prophet is the one whose words come from heaven to men on earth, searching the heart, reaching the conscience and exposing the evil that may have come in. “He that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation (or stirring up) and comfort (or encouragement)” (1 Cor. 14: 3). Now this **was** exactly what Haggai did. His pungent, conscience-arousing messages were distinctly of this character, and so he is pre-eminently “the prophet.” Zechariah’s needed ministry of future things was equally of God, but it was subservient to the rousing words of his brother prophet, whose ministry was in view of the state of soul in God’s people.

A ministry like Zechariah’s will more probably be enjoyed than one of the character of Haggai’s. Carnal believers often find great pleasure in listening to dispensational and eschatological discourses, in attending what are often mis-called “prophetic” conferences ; but what such really

need is the trumpet-like call to consider their ways, rather than eloquent and beautiful discourses about things to come. The Haggais may not be ^{so} popular with the mass as the Zechariahs, but their ministry is ever a much needed one. He who goes on with God will welcome truth, and will thus hold the truth in its right proportions.

At last the house was finished, in the sixth year of Darius the king—a long time indeed since the work had been begun. But persistent effort had eventually prevailed, and the temple, whose foundations had been laid with praise and weeping, and whose walls had been erected with faith and prophecy, was now ready to be dedicated to the service and worship of the Lord God of Israel.

If one goes back and compares, or contrasts, the account of the dedication of the temple of Solomon with that of this house of the captivity, he cannot but feel how meagre was the service of the latter; but, on the other hand, one cannot but recognize it as of the same character. It was, in very deed, a going back to that which was from the beginning. The hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, and four hundred lambs for a peace offering, were few indeed as compared with the twenty-two thousand oxen, and the one hundred and twenty thousand sheep offered by Solomon ; but all spoke of the same Christ who, “ having made peace by the blood of His cross ”

is now the ground of the soul's communion with God.

In solemn contrast with the sweet savor offerings, alone mentioned in connection with Solomon's dedication, we here read of twelve he-goats as a sin-offering for *all Israel*, according to the number of the tribes of Israel (ver. 17). This was eminently fitting, for all Israel had sinned; and on behalf of all Israel, the remnant confessed and judged the sin in which all had participated. Only an active conscience, truly in the light, could have led to this blessed result. The dedication was kept, we are told, with joy, and "they set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses, for the service of God which is at Jerusalem; as it is written in the book of Moses" (ver. 18).

And so, once again, we are reminded of the only way to learn the mind of God, even to consult His holy Word, in dependence on the Spirit who inspired it. "As it is written" would settle many a needless controversy among Christians if there were only grace to "search the Scriptures" and to obey what is found therein. With "It is written," Jesus met every assault of Satan; and when he, for his own ends, misquoted, or partially quoted, from the same Word, concealing an important phrase, he was met with "It is written again," to silence his impious suggestions. This is the path of safety for each saint,

only let none suppose that a mere slavish adherence to "book, chapter and verse," is what is here indicated. This there cannot always be ; but the tenor of Scripture, the broad principles enunciated and exemplified therein, are what one needs to be familiar with. There was no specific scripture that instructed Zerubbabel to offer on this particular occasion twelve goats as a sin offering for all Israel. But it was fully in accord with the word of God so to do; it was in the spirit of the law He had given through Moses, and therefore well-pleasing to Him.

And, in the next place, in obedience to the same Word, "The children of the captivity kept the passover upon the fourteenth day of the first month " (ver. 19). Great was the care exercised that all should be as God had directed. "The priests and the Levites were purified together; all of them were pure, and killed the passover for all the children of the captivity, and for their brethren the priests, and for themselves. And the children of Israel who were come again out of captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the nations of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel, did eat " (vers. 20, 21).

All this is most instructive and enlightening, furnishing a helpful principle for those to act upon in any age, who would please the Lord in their public feasts of love, and their fellowship

one with another. The passover was the great central feast of Israel. It was to them what the Lord's supper is to Christians. In fact, our Lord links the two most intimately, in that it was during the celebration of the one that He instituted the other. The loaf in His hand was the unleavened Passover bread, while the cup was the Passover cup, for which Scripture gives no direct authority, but which was a natural accompaniment of a Jewish meal. Both spoke of the same blessed event—the death of Christ. The one set forth that death in prospect, the other declares that death as already having taken place. "For as oft as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do show (or announce—it might even be rendered, *preach*) the Lord's death till He come" (1 Cor. 11: 26).

In the beginning all confessing Christ's name had their place at that holy table. Then divine instruction was given not to eat with any *one*, called a brother, whose life was wicked. Teachers of false doctrine were likewise debarred from all Christian fellowship, which could not but include participation in the communion supper. With this, God has also warned lest any be partakers of other men's sins, by going on with those unfitted for fellowship, thereby unfitting themselves. And so, with these broad principles to guide, it may be confidently asserted that God has not left believers to decide for themselves

the grave question of who is to be received and who refused at the table of the Lord. The unholy have no place there. Being the Lord's **table**, it implies subjection to Him as such. Hence, we see the priests all purified together. To-day all believers are priests. This then is the scriptural ideal of a Christian gathering—"all of them were pure."

To this company were received "all such as had separated themselves from the filthiness of the nations of the land to seek the Lord," What an enlightening word is this! There are those who object to an expression long current among certain believers: "Separation from evil is God's principle of unity." But is not that exactly what we have here? Were not these dear Israelites one as a separated company from the abominations of the people of the land? Only as so separated could they cleave together. And in any dispensation, I apprehend, the same principle abides for faith. There can be no true practical unity save as evil is refused, and Christ becomes the object of each soul. And separation from evil involves turning to the Lord alone, for He is the one only centre, apart from all the evil. Given His rightful place, the incongruity of endeavoring to cling to what is unholy while seeking to please God, is at once made manifest.

But argument avails little here. This truth, like all others, has to be learned through

the conscience. Men may reason and contend about what to faith is most simple, if there be activity of conscience, enlightened by the word of God. The feeble few of Zerubbabel's day were far beyond some now, who, despite greatly increased light, are quite unable to discern the mind of God because persons are before them instead of the glory of Christ. Much grace is needed if any truth be apprehended that it may be held in the Spirit's power; and this is especially true as to what Scripture reveals in regard to gathering to the name of the Lord Jesus.

CHAPTER VII

A Second Awakening

WE reach a new beginning, as it were, in the present chapter, when Ezra for the first time, is definitely identified with the movement for returning to the place where God had set His name.

Another Artaxerxes is now on the throne, and in his reign God revives the spirits of many who had hitherto remained in Babylon, and fills their hearts with a desire to go up to Jerusalem. Of these Ezra himself is the leader. He was a direct lineal descendant of Phinehas, the man whose javelin had turned aside the wrath of the Lord in the days of Baal-peor, when Balaam taught Balak how to seduce Israel by unholy alliances with the daughters of Moab (Num. 25). To him had been granted an everlasting priesthood, and of this pledge Ezra is witness.

He was, we are told, "a ready scribe in the law of Moses," and one who had the confidence of the king; so when he preferred a request to be permitted to lead another company up from Babylon to the city of God, his petition was heard, and full permission given, "according to the good hand of the Lord his God upon him." This

expression is characteristic. In all his ways Ezra recognized “the good hand of the Lord,” and to that alone he attributes every forward step.

With Ezra went up a considerable company of the children of Israel, including priests, Levites, singers, porters and Nethinim, who left Babylon in the seventh year of Artaxerxes, and in about four months arrived in Jerusalem to join the former company, and there to set forward the work of the Lord.

Of Ezra we read that he “had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments” (ver. 10). His was just the ministry now needed among the returned company, and “the good hand of the Lord” supplied it. A competent, sober *man* of sound judgment, a man mighty in the Scriptures, and an able instructor of his brethren; how invaluable he would be at this time.

Not a mere intellectual student of the word of God, nor one teaching others what had not gripped his own heart and controlled his ways, was Ezra. He had begun by earnestly preparing his own heart to seek the law **of** the Lord. “The preparation of the *heart* in man is of the Lord.” This Ezra recognized. So it is not said that he prepared his head-but his heart. His inmost being was brought under the sway of the truth

of God. His affections were controlled by the Scriptures. He might have said, with Jeremiah; "Thy words were found, and I did eat them: and Thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of my heart." He was personally right with God, and so was prepared to help set others right. Then there was more than inward preparation. Having learned the mind and will of God, he undertook to *do* it. He did not preach truth that he was not living. When under the good hand of God the king granted him all his requests, to leave Babylon and go to Jerusalem for the sake of the Name, he considered not circumstances (which might well have held him where he was, in place of going up to a desolated land and a ruined city), but he at once prepared to go forth trusting "the good hand of the Lord upon him."

One reason there is so little power with much of the preaching and teaching of the day is a lack of consistently *doing* the truth ere proclaiming it. Men preach the Lord's near coming, who give no evidence that the '(blessed hope "' has moulded their ways. Men teach the truth of the mystery of the one body, who yet, for filthy lucre's sake, or because of other circumstances, abide in what practically denies it. Men proclaim the heavenly calling who have never learned to walk on earth as strangers and pilgrims. Is it any wonder their words are without

power and their ministry but as clouds without water? The path of blessing is doing-then teaching. It was thus with the true Servant. Luke writes "of all that Jesus began both to do and to teach" (Acts 1: 1). Woe be to any man, however able and gifted, who ventures to neglect the first while carrying on the second. Ezra was a pattern man in this respect. He undertook to do what he found written ; then "to teach in Israel statutes and judgments." Let every servant of God lay this 10th verse to heart, and ask himself: Am I thus serving my Master ? No doubt such a question will at once bring before every conscientious soul much that calls for self-judgment; and Ezra himself, doubtless, would have felt the same. But the *aim*, the bent of the life, is what I refer to-the endeavor to carry out the order here indicated.

A copy of the letter of Artaxerxes is given in verses 12 to 26, and, as in the case of the previous decrees, this passage is reproduced in Aramaic or Chaldean, directly transcribed from the Persian records. There is something very beautiful in the salutation of this letter: "Artaxerxes, king of kings, unto Ezra the priest, a scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace," and so forth (ver. 12). How marked the contrast between the two. How different their titles, And, in God's sight, how much higher was Ezra's rank than that of him who vain-gloriously

designated himself by a title that properly belongs alone to the Lord Jesus Christ: "Who, in His own times shall show, who is that blessed and only Potentate, King of kings and Lord of lords !"

Who that lived in those olden days would have supposed that in the course of the centuries the name and achievements of Artaxerxes would be almost unknown by millions to *whom* Ezra's name and work would be as familiar as if he had lived but yesterday! There are many such contrasts in the word of God. Ahasuerus is not even certainly identified to-day, but Mordecai is known wherever the word of God has been carried. The Pharaoh of the Exodus has been supposed to be one of half a dozen different monarchs, but no one makes a mistake as to Moses. Gamaliel is only remembered as the teacher of the devoted apostle Paul, and because of his moderation in treating the despised Nazarenes. And so with many more. Better far is it to be a child of God and to walk with Him than to wear earth's proudest diadem or have the widest reputation among carnal men.

Nor, in writing thus, would I reflect adversely upon Artaxerxes. His letter gives good evidence of sincere regard for the glory of the God of heaven. But he takes the place of a patron, Ezra of a servant. And between the two there is a vast difference.

The decree is largely after the order of that of Cyrus. As in the former, so here, stress is laid upon the voluntariness of the project. Permission is given to any or all of the people of Israel "that are minded of their own free will to go up to Jerusalem," to go with Ezra. God would have no coercion, but He removes every legal barrier for those who have the heart to take the arduous journey and to retrace their fathers' steps back to the place where His house is established.

Silver and gold, a free-will offering from the king and his counsellors, as well as from the people, for the habitation of God, Ezra is **bidden to** carry up to Jerusalem for sacrificial offerings, to be offered on Jehovah's altar in Jerusalem; while full liberty was granted to use any superfluity in any way that seemed best "after the will of their God" (vers. 16-18). Goodly vessels were also supplied for the service of the house of God out of the king's own treasure ; and assurance was given that if more were needed, they would be forthcoming (vers. 19, 20).

Commandment was likewise laid upon the king's treasurers beyond the river to help forward the work by giving " whatsoever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the God of heaven, might require, "unto a hundred talents of silver, and to a hundred measures of wheat, and to a hundred baths

of wine, and to a hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much " (vers. ^{PI}, 22).

All that they needed for the service of "the God of heaven " was to be done; and His priests and servants were to be freed from all toll or tribute. Besides all this, Ezra was commissioned to establish order throughout the province, by appointing magistrates and judges, and teaching the law of God to all ignorant of it (vers. 24, 25). And the decree closed as did that of Darius by denouncing severe penalties upon any who were hardy enough to act contrary to its provisions (ver. 26).

Ezra's heart was filled with rejoicing as he received and perused the letter. He recognized it was a greater King who had thus moved Artaxerxes so to favor His people. In holy exultation of spirit he cries, "Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers, who hath put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the Lord which is at Jerusalem: and hath extended mercy unto me before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty princes." Thus had the king's gracious act produced thanksgiving to God, and joy of heart in the breast of His servant.

Again Ezra speaks of "the hand of God." He was a man who seemed never to look at *mere* human instrumentality, but, back of the hand of man, he saw the guiding, or controlling, hand of

the Lord. “I was strengthened,” he says, “as the hand of the Lord my God was upon me, and I gathered together out of Israel chief men to go up with me” (ver. 28).

Of the going up we have already had a brief epitome in verses 6 to 9, but we are to have a fuller description, to learn something of the difficulties to be overcome, the perils to be faced, and the testings of faith, as also its glorious triumph in the next chapter.

Every work that is really of God will have to be tried; but to the man of faith, instructed in the mind of the Lord, difficulties are never insurmountable; but he will be able in holy confidence to say with Paul, “None of these things move me.” Of such a spirit was Ezra the scribe, and of such must be all who would count for God in a day of ruin.

CHAPTER VIII

The March of Faith

WHAT I would especially press upon the conscience of my reader at this juncture is this: Albeit the movement in which Ezra and his company were participants was distinct from that of Zerubbabel, Jeshua and their brethren, there were no new principles involved than those the former company had already learned from the word of God. No new centre was ever thought of. No new place to gather was suggested. Jerusalem was the one only place and Jehovah the one only Name. He had set His name at Jerusalem : consequently thitherward were the faces of all Ezra's company turned. They were soon to learn that those who had preceded them had "made a mess and a failure"* of the whole thing; but that did not set them inquiring if it would not be wise to gather elsewhere, to give up the principle of separation, to step aside from the movement and contentedly go back to Babylon. Not at all. God's word remained, God's centre remained. God's Spirit

*I quote by memory from J. N. D. [Failure in what is of God calls for suited ministry---for exhortation and correction unto righteousness. But false principles and false position leave no divine basis for recovery. The false principles or position of necessity must be abandoned.]—*Ed.*

remained. And for this fresh company there was nothing to do, as guided by that Spirit, but to return to and continue to own the one centre in accordance with the unchanging Word.

Surely in this we may learn a lesson which some are fast letting slip-a lesson which really learned would save from much discouragement as well as from many a blunder here and from much loss at the judgment-seat of Christ.

We turn now to our chapter, and here again we have a table of the chief of the fathers-a table that God delighted to put on record, and which, like the former one, stands on the books of eternity. All will be forever remembered by Him who never overlooks anything done in faith and subjection to His Word. Had one of these turned back to Babylon He would have noted it too ; and had any stopped half way between the land of Shinar and the city of God, His eye would have discerned it and His hand recorded it. Solemn considerations are these for any who might be disposed to trifle with divine truth.

Not one of the names here listed may be otherwise known to us; but all stand in God's sight for distinct living personalities, all of whose acts and words are as clear in His mind as though they still tabernacled in flesh and blood, and walked the earth as strangers and sojourners, servants of the God of heaven, cleaving to His

name in the midst of ruin. It is for us to occupy this very position to-day, as though in their place; and, if faithful in it, rest assured, He who forgets not one of them will pass by nothing in our history that He can reward in that day,

When the whole company were assembled together by Ezra's orders, by "the river that runneth to Ahava," they abode in tents-the sign of pilgrimage-for three days, the period of full display or testimony; and then all were reviewed before their priestly leader, who soon observed that the sons of Levi were sadly conspicuous by their absence. Not one was found among the pilgrim band. What did it mean ? Evidently it was harder for these men whose whole portion must be in God, to rise to the blessedness of such a place, than for those who expected to have an inheritance in their ancient home. The Levites were settled in a large measure of comfort in the land of the stranger. To forsake it all and go forth in simplicity to the place of the Name, meant more to them than to some others.* But, on the other hand, how

* Similar **tests occur now-a-days**. I know a clergyman who, years ago, was convinced of the **unscripturalness** of his position ; but, opposed by his family when contemplating "going forth, for His name's sake, outside the camp," said : "For my children's sake I will remain where I am, but will preach the truth as far as I can." He lived to see his son a **convicted** felon outlawed by the State; his daughter, an **actress**

much greater the blessing, when one thus puts God to the test and finds Him ever the all-sufficient One anticipating every need, and leading the soul out in a way that others seldom know.

Ezra at once sent a deputation of faithful men to lay before the Levites and the Nethinims, who were of old appointed by David to the service of the Levites, *to lay* before them the importance of going forth with them, "That they should bring unto us ministers for the house of our God" (vers. x5-17). And thus it was that a number of both classes were, as Ezra so beautifully puts it, "by the good hand of our God upon us," led to join their company. Among these one is especially mentioned as "a man of understanding." Valuable indeed in any movement of God's Spirit are such men; like those of old, who "had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do."

The company was now, one might have supposed, ready to go up to the house of God at Jerusalem. But Ezra has other thoughts. He knows the way is long and lonely. Dangers abound. There are perils of robbers and perils of wild beasts. A safe convoy is surely needed, and

on the world's unholy stage; and he himself made practical shipwreck of the faith.

Not in vain has God said, "Them that honor Me I will honor, and they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed;" and again, "The Lord is with you while ye be with Him."

where shall such be found but in the living **God** ? “The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him and delivereth them.” So a fast is proclaimed by the river-side, and all the people are urged to humble themselves before God, to entreat of Him “a prosperous way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance ” (ver. 21). What a lovely sight in the eyes of the Lord was that self-judged, fasting company, in the dust before Him, crying to Him to be their Guide and Deliverer. No ark, borne on the shoulders of anointed priests, was there to lead them now. No pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night was there to guide. But they knew that He who of old had led them through the wilderness changeth not; and they sent up their petition to Him to be indeed their Shepherd, preserving them from every danger and meeting every need, all along their march of faith.

It would have been easy to have applied to their royal patron, Artaxerxes, for a convoy, but this would have given the lie to the profession Ezra had made in his presence. It stirs the heart to read his reasons, so artlessly given in verse 22, for turning alone to God. “For I was ashamed,” he says, “to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to keep us against the enemy in the way; because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him; but His

wrath is against all them that forsake Him." This is most blessed. Alas, how little is the spirit of Ezra entered into in our time-serving age, when almost any means are adopted for carrying on what is called the work of the Lord, and any help is greedily sought, even from the unholy and profane, with no thought of the awful dishonor done to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Money is begged from all sources; patronage desired from the ungodly, if they have but wealth and influence-and this by professed followers of Him who said, "If I were hungry I would not tell thee;" and whose servants in apostolic days "went forth, for His name's sake taking nothing of the Gentiles." Ezra's faith and godliness might well put all such to shame. His stand contrasts with the dreadful lowering of the standard so prevalent throughout Christendom.

Having borne faithful testimony to the king, he and his company turned to God in fasting and prayer, beseeching Him to lead them forth as of old; and, the record adds, "He was entreated of us" (ver. 23). And so will He ever be where there is faith to count upon Him, and holiness to refuse all that would compromise His glory.

Not only did Ezra thus honor God's name before the powers of the world, but he was equally careful in caring for what belonged to the house of God, the treasure committed to him, "~~that~~

good deposit " consisting of the gold and silver given by his brethren as an offering unto the Lord's house, and the vessels entrusted to him by the king. All were carefully weighed and tabulated, and delivered for safe-keeping to twelve of the priests, who were especially separated for this particular trust. To them Ezra gave a solemn charge, reminding us of Paul's charge to his son in the faith, Timothy, in the first chapter of his second epistle. "Ye are holy unto the Lord," Ezra says to them, "the vessels are holy also; and the silver and the gold are a free-will offering unto the Lord God of your fathers. Watch ye, and keep them, until ye weigh them before the chief of the priests and the Levites, and chief of the fathers of Israel, at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the Lord" (vers. 28, 29). These were earnest and serious words, and must have made each of the twelve feel intensely the sacredness of the trust committed to them. So to us has a deposit of holy things been entrusted, even the truth of which God has seen fit to make us stewards. We are to safe-guard this holy treasure all through our journey, until we reach the place of manifestation, when all will be weighed once more in the balances of the sanctuary. Well will it be for us then if we have lost nothing on the way, but have held fast, like the beloved apostle Paul, all that has been committed unto us.

The priests and the Levites duly witnessed and tabulated the amount of gold and silver and the weight of the vessels, and the appointed guardians took all in their charge, after which the journey was begun.

On the twelfth day of the first month the caravan left the river of Ahava, seven days after Ezra's first start (chap. 7 : 9), a week having passed in needful preparation, All along the journey the hand of God was upon them, and Ezra testifies, " He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and of all such as lay in wait by the way " (ver. 31). What indeed had they to fear from the hand of the enemy when under the protecting care of the hand of God. And what has any saint to fear when that same almighty, yet infinitely tender Hand is ever upon him for good. It has well been said that God is all that we take Him for. The great trouble with many of us is we are so straitened in ourselves, and thus we limit the Holy One of Israel. "Able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think " is the unlimited resource available to faith.

At last Jerusalem was reached, and for three days the pilgrims rested after their long and arduous journey. Then came the day of reckoning, when account was to be made of the treasure conveyed by the twelve appointed priests, The gold and silver and the vessels were all weighed

in the house of God by Meremoth, Eleazar, Jozabad and Noadiah, four men, upon the fourth day. The number in each case is significant, for throughout Scripture four speaks of testing, "By number and by weight of every one," the test is made, and all recorded in the priestly record, and found intact. The twelve had fulfilled their trust in a way that you and I, my reader, will be glad indeed to have done, if the day of reckoning give us as clean a sheet as they obtained.

The accounting rendered in a rightful manner, the newly arrived company now flock about the altar of God as a band of worshipers, with a great number of burnt offerings; and, as at the dedication of the temple, with "twelve he-goats as a sin offering for all Israel." They take their stand with their brethren as part of a failed people, acknowledging their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, but counting on the covenant-mercy of their faithful God (ver. 35).

It was a scene of great moral beauty, and must have deeply affected the whole company, as once more they were permitted to approach God at the appointed place, and sing the Lord's song about His altar and in His house. Often had they longed for this hour when "by the rivers of Babylon they sat down and wept when they remembered Zion" (Ps. 137). There they had cried, "If I ~~forget~~ thee, O Jerusalem, let my

tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy." Now they were actually in the place where Jehovah had caused His name to dwell of old, and the sweet savor of a multitude of burnt offerings ascended to His throne to testify to the gladness of their hearts; while the sin offering, burned to ashes, told how fully they recognized the evil of having departed from Him who should ever have been the joy of their souls; the God of their fathers, now fully recognized as their God, despite their feeble condition.

It has been supposed by many, on the authority of Jewish tradition, that the "**Songs of degrees**" (Ps. 120 to 134) were sung by Ezra and his company at various stages of the way, until at last they stood in the house of the Lord and could lift up their hands in the sanctuary and bless Jehovah. These psalms, read in this connection, are, at least, very suggestive, and lead the soul along the way from the tents of darkness to the house of God most blessedly.

The last verse of our chapter tells us that the king's commissions were duly delivered to the authorities beyond the river, as a consequence of which they dared no longer hinder; but in accordance with their instructions "they furthered the people and the house of God." So had the wrath of man been made to praise Him, and the remainder been restrained.

CHAPTER IX

The Break-down by Amalgamation

THERE is perhaps no greater trial a man can be called upon to face, than to take, through grace, a position he has seen from the word of God to be scriptural, and then to be rudely awakened to the realization that the people who were in that position before him, are not what he had hoped to find them. Yea, that they are even less spiritual, less devoted, less zealous for God, than some he has left behind him in systems where quasi-darkness prevailed. Then indeed one needs to be firmly held by the truth, or he is likely to be altogether overcome and completely disheartened. Many an unstable soul has, by such a test, been utterly swept away from his moorings. Such often go back in despair to the unscriptural positions they had abandoned, and give out a bad report of the land, thus hindering others from following the light vouchsafed to them. While some, with too much conscience to build again the things they had destroyed, become what one might call spiritual free lances-and sometimes, alas, spiritual Ishmaelites, their hand against every man,

and every man's hand against them ; criticizing, fault-finding, restless and unhappy; occupied with evil, lamenting the conditions of the times; bewailing the unfaithfulness of anybody and everybody but themselves; and so falling into a spirit of Pharisaism that is helpful to no one, and a hindrance to all they come in contact with.

Now all this results from occupation with persons instead of with Christ. It is supposed that because people occupy a position of peculiar favor, and have been blessed with special light, they must needs be personally more to be relied on than the generality of Christians, and that the flesh is less likely to act in them than in others. Often one hears of people "coming out to certain brethren," or "joining" this or that company of saints. All this is bound to result in disaster.

It is to Christ alone we are called to go forth, without the camp, bearing His reproach. He, blessed be God, never disappoints. If the eye be fixed on Him-if the heart be occupied with Him-if He be recognized as the one only Centre-then, let saints be what they may as to their spiritual state, there can be no lasting disappointment, for Christ abides.

If I see it to be according to Scripture to gather with fellow-believers to the name of the Lord Jesus, owning that "there is one body, and one Spirit," the behaviour of those already so gathered cannot alter the truth for one moment.

Rather does it call for exercise of soul on my part that I may be a help to them, stirring them up to fresh devotedness and renewed zeal in self-judgment.

It is far easier to stand aside and point out the low state of the rest-even to withdraw altogether from their company-than to emulate Ezra who, by his personal faithfulness, lifted the whole company to a higher plane. There will be less trouble, less perplexity, less concern, if one simply turns away and leaves the rest to go on as they will; but God is not thereby glorified nor are failing saints recovered.

The position of gathering to the name of the Lord in simplicity as members of the one body, is not one in which there is no trouble. Far from it. But it is a place where all trouble can be set right and every difficulty met *by the word* of **God alone**; and this is what cannot be said of any sect in Christendom. There human ingenuity, man-made regulations, carnal laws and ordinances are relied on to keep things in order and to settle disputes. But those who turn, in faith, from all this to Christ alone as Centre and the Word alone for guide and disciplinary instruction, find that Word all-sufficient if there be but obedience to its principles. Of all this the present and the last chapters furnish us with a most blessed illustration,

The first burst of praise and worship over, for

Ezra there came this rude awakening to which I have referred above. One can imagine the awful disappointment, the poignant grief that were his when the sad state of affairs that had developed among the separated Jews **was** revealed to him. No description can bring it before us more vividly than his own words.

“Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites. For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons; so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the peoples of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass: and when I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonished” (vers. 1-3).

Devoted and faithful steward of God! How our hearts are moved by his bitter grief when he is thus brought to realize the low condition of the people who are in the only right position. Could one be astonished if he had turned heart-sick away from them all, and in lofty seclusion of

spirit endeavored to go on alone with God, giving up all hope of corporate testimony?

But this he does not do. In faithfulness to God he cannot forego the position, and he loves the people of the Lord too much to give them up.

One thing is encouraging to begin with. While, alas, “the nobles and princes were chief in this trespass,” yet there were princes who were, clearly, *not* of the mind of the rest, but “who sought and cried because of the abominations done in their midst.” The very fact that these men sought Ezra out to lay the true condition of affairs before him, was evidence of their desire to help and deliver the rest.

It is pitiable indeed when among those outwardly separated, links are formed and maintained that deny the integrity of that separation; and it is unspeakably sad when the leaders fail in this very thing and thus encourage the simple in departure from God. More than once have we seen people who would not tolerate an ecclesiastical yoke with unbelievers, yet uniting with the world in business, even in marriage, and in kindred ways. This is similar to what we have here in Ezra.

The people were out of Babylon as to their bodies, but the spirit of Babylon possessed them still. This it was led to amalgamation with the uncircumcised nations of the land. The same evil principle frequently works in a directly op-

posite way. Often have we seen those who were supposed to have judged the sin of sectarianism and left human systems, yet maintain as sectarian a spirit when gathered out as any could possibly have who contended for the most rigid denominationalism. It is related of Luther that he said in the beginning he had spent much time in denouncing the people of Rome, until he found "every man had a greater pope in his own heart than ever sat in the papal chair." This is the fruit of legality; while what we have in our chapter is rather an unholy license—a "turning the grace of God into lasciviousness"—an utter misuse of that grace.

Almost heart-broken, Ezra manifested all the signs of deepest distress of spirit, and sat down in bitter astonishment. That such things prevailed in Babylon would not have amazed him. That they could be tolerated among those gathered to the place of the Name, dumbfounded him.

But at once the news of his grief spread among the people with a blessed and soul-cheering result. That all were not in sympathy with the looseness that had come in soon became evident. "Then were assembled unto me," he tells us, "every one that trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those that had been carried away; and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice" (ver. 4).

God had said, long before, by Isaiah, "To this man will I look; to him that is humble and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at My word" (Isa. 66 :2). Such there were still among the remnant, and upon them the Lord could look in blessing. These men and Ezra, acting with God, would be a majority, however few in number. Such men are likely to be regarded by the unspiritual as troublers and "old fogies;" but where there is real exercise of soul, God can be depended on to show whom He recognizes, in due time.

It was "at the evening sacrifice" that Ezra arose from his heaviness and was uplifted in spirit above the depressing circumstances that had so bowed him with grief. The evening sacrifice speaks of the cross. It was "the continual burnt offering"—Christ the holy One doing the will of God even unto death—"a sacrifice of a sweet smelling savor." As this blessed odor greets Ezra's nostrils, he is delivered from his speechless anguish and enabled to pour out his soul in confession and prayer.

And is it not ever thus? As Christ and His cross are before the soul one is raised above occupation with evil and depression of spirit because of failure on the part of one's brethren.

Falling upon his knees, and spreading out his hands—"holy hands, without wrath and doubting"—before God, he opened his mouth in a

petition that is most affecting in its humility, its regard for God's holiness and truth, and the wonderfully blessed way in which he, personally pure (as Daniel, in *his* ninth chapter, and Nehemiah's companions in *his*), identifies himself with the people in all their failure and sin.

The balance of the chapter is entirely devoted to this prayer; it will repay the closest study and meditation: "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to Thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens. Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass unto this day; and for our iniquities have we, our kings, and our priests, been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to a spoil, and to confusion of face, as it is this day" (vers. 6, 7). In these words, observe, how far back Ezra goes in tracing the present evil to its source. It was the sin that had resulted in the captivity which had never been really judged, and had been the parent sin of all the rest. The low state of the whole nation affected even the returned remnant. And so it is in Christendom. We have sinned since the days of our fathers. First love was left at the very beginning and true recovery there has never been. Who has really felt the sin of the Church in turning from her glorified Head and linking herself with the

world ? Here and there the Spirit of God produces contrition and some sense of the failure, but who has fully fathomed it? Yet ever and anon God works in revival, drawing a few back in heart to Christ; but declension almost invariably follows. It has been said that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty," and it is as true in spiritual things as in carnal.

Ezra details before God the work His grace had wrought; only the more to emphasize the insubordination that had misused that grace so sadly. "And now for a little space grace hath been showed from the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in His holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage. For we are [not were] bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem " (vers. 8, 9). The reference to the "nail " is doubtless a recognition of Isaiah's prophecy of the " nail in a sure place," upon which Jehovah's glory was to hang, which is, in the full sense, Christ Himself (Isa. 22: 21-25). A partial fulfilment had already been given; God had acted in great grace in thus giving a "little reviving," though they were still bondmen; for they share

in the failure of the whole nation. It was no time for fleshly exultation, no time for pride of position; but only for lowliness of spirit and humiliation of soul because of the dark record of evil in which all had their share.

Ezra next recalls the special sin of the remnant, and here again he confesses all as his sin. "And now, O our God, what shall we say after this ? for we have forsaken Thy commandments" (yet he who so speaks had possibly been less than a week among them. What an example for any who would walk with God to-day, and what a rebuke to the Pharisaism that would coldly point out the failure of others, while professing to have no part in it oneself!)—"we have forsaken Thy commandments, which Thou hast commanded by Thy servants the prophets, saying, The land unto which ye go to possess it, is an unclean land with the filthiness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations, which have filled it from one end to another with their uncleanness. Now, therefore, give not your daughters unto their sons, nor seek their peace or their wealth forever; that ye may be strong, and eat the good of the land, and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever" (vers. 10-12). Thus had God spoken. Alas, how had this word been forgotten by those who had in other respects honored His truth, by returning to the divinely-appointed Centre. Separation would

have been their strength. Amalgamation was likely to be but their ruin; unless, indeed, the evil were judged and put away from their midst. And this snare of amalgamation with the ungodly is ever a lurking danger to the children of God. I do not for a moment speak of the coming together of believers, who have been kept apart by dissension and unscriptural judgments, as amalgamation. God forbid! When that which is of the same nature flows together, it is not amalgamation but unity. Things different in character are amalgamated to form a union which can never be a true unity. It is against such amalgamation we are warned in 2 Cor. 6: “ Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers : for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness ? and what communion hath light with darkness? and what concord hath Christ with Belial ? or what part hath a believer with an unbeliever? and what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For ye are the temple of the living God, as God hath said: I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God and they shall be My people ” (vers. 14-16). In the beginning “God divided the light from the darkness,” and it has been the business of the devil ever since to seek to link the twain together.

Feeling in his soul the seriousness of so unholy a union, Ezra goes on to own God’s justice

in visiting them with His displeasure. "And after all that is come upon us for our evil deeds, and for our great trespass, seeing that Thou, our God, hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast given us such deliverance as this, should we again break Thy commandments, and join in affinity with the peoples of these abominations, wouldst not Thou be angry with us till Thou hadst consumed us, so that there should be no remnant nor escaping?" (vers. 13, 14). Light obeyed, results in greater light; but "if the light that is in thee become darkness how great is that darkness." God must visit those in chastisement who trifle with His truth. The more truth, the greater the responsibility, and the more severe the displeasure of the Lord if it be set at naught or spurned.

Feeling all this deeply, Ezra can only conclude with a fuller expression of confession than ever, and a throwing himself and the people, in all their wretched condition, right into the arms of the God they have sinned against. "O Lord God of Israel, Thou art righteous: for we remain yet escaped, as it is this day: behold we are before Thee in our trespasses: for we cannot stand before Thee because of this" (ver. 15). And so he concludes his prayer and leaves the case in the hands of God, who, though Ezra knew it not, had even then begun to work, as the concluding chapter gives abundant witness.

How much greater might be the blessing in many a similar time of distress, were there more of such dealing with God and less of appeal to man; more humiliation and confession and less publishing the sorrows abroad; more spreading out the hands unto the Lord and less pamphleteering. Oh for grace to hearken unto the lesson here given for our learning!

CHAPTER X

Humiliation and Lifting Up

MIGHTILY wrought the Spirit of God in the hearts and consciences of the guilty people, while Ezra was praying and speaking of their fallen condition to the Lord. So much so, that the work of recovery was already well under way, for when he “had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore” (ver. 1). These were gracious tears indeed, and told of stirrings of soul that could only lead to blessing. How different might the after-history of these people have been had Ezra turned coldly away from them in disgust or despair, and left them to go on in their low estate. Such conduct could not have helped, and might only have provoked the flesh in them; but the sight of this newly-arrived man of God on his face in agony of spirit over their carelessness and unscriptural ways, brought them to their senses, giving them to realize, perhaps for the first time, something of the gravity of their sin.

Shechaniah, one of the sons of Elam, became the mouthpiece of the now repentant wrong-

doers, confessing unreservedly the failure, and, in a manner beautiful in its season, seeking to comfort the heart of Ezra. "We have trespassed against our God," is his frank acknowledgment, 'and have taken strange wives of the people of the land. This was in direct violation of the prohibition in the law of Moses. They had not consulted in this grave matter "that which was written;" hence a grievous error had been committed which now bore sorrowful fruit indeed; for there must be many a heart-break ere matters were put right; and, in fact, against the poor ignorant heathen women, wrong had been done that could never be righted on earth. But Shechaniah dares to count on God's mercy and adds: "Yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing" (ver. 2). But this hope of future blessing is based on one condition only, and that, complete judgment of the evil, manifested in putting away all the strange wives. He calls on all who have sinned to enter into covenant with God to be obedient in this matter, and bids Ezra be of good courage and act as a judge in each case that shall arise (vers. 3, 4). The latter exacted an immediate pledge of the chief priests, the Levites and all Israel, that they would do as Shechaniah had said; and hard as it must have been for many of them, they swore to be obedient.

Refusing all physical refreshment because of

the travail of his soul, "Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib," there to mourn in secret over the sin that now made such drastic and heart-rending action necessary if the people would be right with God (ver. 6).

Word was immediately sent to all the children of the captivity that they should gather together at Jerusalem within three days; otherwise, any refusing so to do would be cut off, or "separated from the congregation of those that had been carried away," and all his substance forfeited (ver. 8). To refuse now to obey the Word would show a hardness of conscience that could not be tolerated and a wilfulness of spirit that proved the culprit altogether unfit to go on with his brethren.

At the appointed time all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered themselves together to Jerusalem. It was the twentieth day of the ninth month, in the rainy season, and "all the people sat in the street of the house of God, trembling because of this matter and for the great rain " (ver. 9). A dismal company surely, but a determined one, ready to carry out the word of the Lord at all costs.

Faithfully Ezra the priest placed their sin before them, abating nothing of their guilt, and commanding them how to act if truly repentant. They had transgressed. There had been a direct

violation of God's revealed will, in taking strange wives to add to the already heavy load of Israel's trespass. He, therefore, called on them to "make confession unto the Lord God of your fathers, and do His pleasure: and separate **your-**selves from the peoples of the land, and from the strange wives " (vers. 10, 11).

The **wrenchings** of heart this would occasion can be better imagined than described, but firmly the whole congregation answered, "As **thou** hast said, so must we do" (ver. 12). There was no caviling, no trying to avoid the result of **their** unequal yokes, but a whole-hearted determination to obey the word of God at all costs. Had conscience only been active a few years before, what pangs of anguish might now have been avoided ! Thus it ever is, when men attempt to play fast and loose with the will of the Lord.

But all must be done in an orderly and lawful way, so they asked for time to arrange every thing as humanely as possible. "But the people are many, and it is a time of much rain, and we *are not* able to stand without, neither *is* this a work of one day, or two; for we are many that have transgressed in this thing. Let now our rulers of all the congregation stand, and let all them that have taken strange wives in our cities come at appointed times, and with them the elders of every city, and *the* judges thereof,

until the fierce wrath of our God for this matter be turned from us" (vers. 13, 14). This was no mere carnal expedient to gain time, but expressed the earnest desire of the people that, in the sad puttings-away that must ensue, all things should be done decently and in order. Doubtless there also entered into it the wish to avoid any wrong being done to any lawful wife who was really of the seed of Israel.

Chief priests and Levites assisted Ezra in the matter, and in the space of three months the iniquity had been dealt with throughout the land, all the heathen women and their offspring being set aside (vers. 15-17). Heart-rending must some of the experiences have been; but all were the fruit of departure from God and acting in self-will.

The chapter closes with a third list of **names**—this time of most solemn import. It is the record of those who "had taken strange wives; and some of them had wives by whom they had children" (ver. 44). God, who before had noted the faithfulness of many of these very men in coming up from Babylon, now took cognizance of the failure of each one just as particularly. For this they must suffer loss at the day of Christ.

On the part of those so near to God as the priests, this sin was especially obnoxious, and we are therefore definitely informed that "they gave their hands that they would put away their

wives; and being guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their trespass ” (ver. 19). Thus the breach was made up, and they were restored to their forfeited privileges.

With this record the book of Ezra ends. He had been used of God to bring His separated people to a realization of the way they had failed in regard to maintaining the trust committed to them ; self- judgment had resulted, and now the way was open for happy fellowship and helpful ministry. In using the word *fellowship* in this instance, I am not forgetful of the fact that it is a word that belongs entirely to the New Testament. I use it **here** rather as ideal and expressive of what was typified than that the thing itself was then truly known and enjoyed.

Fellowship is the result of the Holy Spirit's descent to earth and His indwelling of all believers. He thus brings us into the fellowship of God's Son. Where separation from evil is maintained and saints hold the Head, there is communion one with another in the Spirit's power. This is characteristic of the present dispensation of the mystery, and is an advance on anything known in Old Testament times.

Where Christians do not thus go on with God, walking in the Spirit, there may be a certain kind of fairly agreeable, and even enjoyable companionship, but genuine fellowship will be unknown.

With this remark we close, for the present, the instructive and searching book of Ezra. For further information of an equally important character as to the returned remnant and their priestly minister, we must turn to the following book in our Bibles, written by another equally devoted servant, though a man of more soldier-like character, Nehemiah; while in the book of Esther we find recorded God's care over those who remained in Babylon when they might have gone to Jerusalem, and with whom He does not openly connect His name.

“ Now unto Him that is able to guard you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever, Amen! ”
(Jude 24, ~~25~~—1911 Version).

