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EZRA

OR

RESTORATION FROM BABYLON

An Exposition

BY

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(FOURTH EDITION)



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INTRODUCTION

THE book of Ezra marks an important epoch in God's dealings with His people Israel. Although seventy years had elapsed, it is yet the continuation of 2 Chronicles; for time does not count with the Jews when in exile from the land of promise. They had lost everything by their sins and apostasy, and God had sent Nebuchadnezzar to chastise them, to destroy His own house which His people had profaned and polluted, to carry them away captive to Babylon, and "to fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her sabbaths." (2 Chron. xxxvi. 21.)

Nothing could be sadder than the record of the destruction of Jerusalem, and the termination of the kingdom as entrusted in responsibility to the hands of man, except indeed the still more fearful accounts of the siege and capture of Jerusalem by Titus soon after the commencement of the Christian era.

The long-suffering of God had been tested in every possible way. In His patient grace He had borne with the high-handed rebellion of His people; He had lingered with a yearning heart, like the Saviour when He was upon earth, over the city which was the expression of royal grace; He had sent to them by His messengers, "rising up betimes and sending; because He had compassion on His

people, and on His dwelling-place; but they mocked the messengers of God, and despised His words, and misused His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till there was no remedy. Therefore He brought upon them the king of the Chaldees," &c. The sword of His justice thus fell upon His guilty people; for their sins had exceeded those even of the Amorites whom God had driven out before them. (See 2 Kings xxi. 11.) God's throne on earth was henceforward transferred to Babylon, and the times of the Gentiles—which still continue, and will do so until Christ Himself shall establish His throne, the throne of His father David (see Luke i. 32, 33; xxi. 24)—commenced. Lo-Ammi (not my people) * was in this way written upon the chosen race, and they entered upon the sorrowful experience of captivity and banishment under the judicial dealings of the hand of their God.

But now, when the book of Ezra begins, the seventy years of their exile, which had been foretold by Jeremiah, had been completed, and Ezra relates the actings of God in connection therewith for the accomplishment of His own sure and faithful word; and it is the character of these which explains the attitude of God towards His people during the times of the Gentiles, and also, to some extent, the peculiarity of this portion of the Scriptures, as well as Nehemiah and Esther. In these books God is no longer seen actively interposing in the affairs of His people, but He works, as it were, behind the scenes, and at the same time, recognizing the new

* It is on this account that God never, in these post-captivity books, whatever His care over them, addresses the Jews as His people.

order which He Himself has established, He uses the Gentile monarchs, into whose hands He had committed the sceptre of the earth, for the execution of His purposes.

Bearing these principles in mind we shall be the better able to enter intelligently upon the study of this book. The book divides itself into two parts. The first six chapters give the account of the return of the captives who responded to the proclamation of Cyrus, and of the building of the temple; the last four of the mission of Ezra himself.

EZRA.

CHAPTER I.

THERE are two things in this chapter—the proclamation of Cyrus, and the response to it on the part of the people, together with an account of the number of “the vessels of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods” (v. 7), and which Cyrus now restored to those of the captivity who were about to return to Jerusalem. The first verse draws back the curtain, and reveals the source of the power which was acting then, and through all the subsequent events of this book, for the fulfilment of Jehovah’s purposes. It runs, “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, that he might make a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing,” &c.

Let us pause for a moment to point out how the Lord—whatever the outward appearances—holds the hearts of all men in His hands, and turneth them whithersoever He will; how He uses men of all

degrees as the instruments of the counsels of His will. The very mention of Cyrus carries us a step further back. "Who," says the prophet Isaiah, speaking in the name of Jehovah, "raised up the righteous man from the east, called him to his foot, gave the nations before him," &c.? (Chap. xli. 2.) And again, "That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure, even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid." (Chap. xliv. 28.)

This prophecy was uttered long before the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, and at least a hundred years before Jeremiah was called to his prophetic work, and thus shows that the eye and heart of God are perpetually upon His people, and upon their interests, and that the public events of the world, the rise and fall of monarchies, the advent of mighty conquerors, are but the instruments of His power, by which He works on through the governments of the world to fulfil His own purposes in relation to His earthly people. How calmly therefore the children of God may rest amid political confusions and strife! In this way God had designated by the mouth of Isaiah, two hundred years before the event narrated in our chapter, His chosen vessel for the restoration of His people, and for the erection of His house at Jerusalem.

A century passed away, and Jeremiah prophesied during the closing days of the kingdom, alternately warning and beseeching his people—warning them of the certainty of the approaching judgments, and beseeching them to repent and to humble themselves before the God whose wrath they had provoked by

their wickedness and folly. It was in the course of his work that he said, "This whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the Lord," &c. (Jer. xxv. 11, 12.) Also, "For thus saith the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon, I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place." (Jer. xxix. 10.) First, then, Cyrus is designated long years before he was born into this world, and after another period had elapsed Jeremiah, while announcing the approaching captivity of the people, proclaims the exact duration of their exile.

But there is yet another instrument, not appearing indeed in this chapter, whom God was pleased to associate with Himself in carrying out His purposes of grace and blessing towards His people.

Turning to the book of Daniel we read, "In the first year of his reign" (that of Darius) "I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes," &c. (Daniel ix. 2, 3.) God had spoken the word concerning, and provided the instruments for, the restoration of His people; and yet what do we find? That one of the captives, whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away to Babylon, the prophet Daniel, had discovered, not by

any special revelation, but by patient study of the writings of Jeremiah, that God had fixed the period of seventy years for "the desolations of Jerusalem."

Thereon, grounding himself upon this infallible word, he gave himself to prayer and fasting, humbling himself before God, confessing the sins of his people, and making supplication for the fulfilment of His own word. "O Lord," he said, "according to all thy righteousness, I beseech thee, let thine anger and thy fury be turned away from thy city Jerusalem, thy holy mountain; because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and thy people are become a reproach to all that are about us. Now, therefore, O our God, hear the prayer of thy servant, and his supplications, and cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate, for the Lord's sake." (vv. 16, 17.) Thus Daniel, identifying himself with the state of his people, and in communion with the mind of God, had the unspeakable privilege of becoming an intercessor for Israel, and for the fulfilment of the promises of God. His prayer was heard (vv. 21-27); and we thereby learn that God in His grace permits His people to enter into His own thoughts, and to be associated with Himself in the accomplishment of His counsels for His own glory.

All therefore was now ready; the preparatory work had all been accomplished. In accordance with Isaiah's prediction "the righteous man from the east" had been called to the sovereignty of the Gentiles; and it is through him that the appointed deliverance must come. The next action is therefore recorded—"the Lord stirred up the spirit of

Cyrus king of Persia," and the following proclamation is the result:

"Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and He hath charged me to build Him an 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 that is in Jerusalem." (vv. 2-4.)

Three things are here announced; viz., the commission which Cyrus himself had received as to the Lord's house; his royal permission to any of the Jews to return to Jerusalem for the purpose of building the temple; and lastly, his invitation to those Jews who should remain in his dominions, to have fellowship with those who should depart by freewill offerings towards the object they had in view.

The rest of the chapter is taken up with an account of the effect produced by the proclamation. We say "the effect of the proclamation," but the reader will not fail to notice that it was He who had stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, who "raised" the spirit of those who offered themselves for the holy work in prospect. Two or three particulars only need to be observed. It is of importance, first of all, to point out that the chief of the fathers who offered themselves for the work were of the two

tribes, Judah and Benjamin. There were also Levites, but they did not count as a tribe, for Levi had "no part nor inheritance with his brethren: the Lord is his inheritance," &c. (See Deut. x. 8, 9.) It is plain indeed from this and other scriptures that, though there may have been individuals from other tribes, there were but these two tribes restored. It was only therefore to Judah and Benjamin that Christ, when born into this world, was afterwards presented for acceptance; and owing to their having rejected Him, it is they, and they only of the twelve tribes, who will pass through the terrible trouble, "such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time; no, nor ever shall be," which will be consequent upon the advent and power of the anti-christ in Jerusalem. For the same reason, the ten tribes will not be collected and restored until after the appearing of the Lord for the salvation of the remnant in the land. (See Zechariah xiv., Ezekiel xx. 33-44, chap. xxxiv., and Jeremiah xxxi. 6-14.)

In the next place, God wrought in the hearts of the neighbours of those who devoted themselves to the work of the Lord's house, for they "offered willingly," according to the terms of the proclamation, of their substance, helping them with vessels of silver and gold, &c. Lastly, Cyrus himself showed his interest in the work, in evidence that his heart also had been touched by divine power, by restoring the vessels of the temple which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods (See Daniel v. 1-4); and these he numbered unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. (vv. 6-9.)

We have thus, in this chapter, all the signs of a genuine work of God. Concurrence of heart and object is produced in all concerned, whether in Cyrus, without whose permission the captives could not have returned; in the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, who were needed for the actual work of building; or in those who remained, who, in having fellowship with their brethren by their freewill offerings, contributed towards the necessary expenses. There were no preliminary meetings to arrange and to come to an agreement, but the union of heart and purpose was produced alone by the action of the Lord on the hearts of all alike. This distinguishes a divine from a human work, and is the sure proof of a real action of the Spirit of God. Every needed instrument therefore comes forward at the right moment, for the work is of God, and it must be accomplished.

The last three verses contain the number of the sacred vessels which Sheshbazzar received from Cyrus, and brought up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

CHAPTER II.

WE have in this chapter a register of "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." (v. 1.) There are several interesting particulars to be noticed in the record; and the first is, that the fact of its existence shows how precious to God was the response which His grace had produced in the hearts of His people, however feebly they may have entered into His thoughts in regard to His house. On this account He has caused this list to be preserved, in evidence that He beholds with joy the smallest fruits of His Spirit's work, and that the very names of His people are known and proclaimed as an encouragement to all to walk in His ways, to be identified with His interests, and to maintain fidelity in times of corruption and apostasy. (Compare Luke xii. 8 and Rev. iii. 5.) In verse 2 the names of the leaders are given, and then the people are classified according to their family descent.

Examining this catalogue a little more closely, a fourfold division will be found. Down to the end of verse 42, those who were undoubtedly of Israel, of Judah, Benjamin, or of Levi (among the last both singers and porters), are described. Then follow

two other classes, the Nethinim, and the servants of Solomon, concerning whom a few words will be necessary. (1) The Nethinim. (*vv.* 43-58.) The question is raised whether these were of Jewish descent. The word would seem to mean "those that are given;" and it has been concluded that they, from the place in which their names occur in the chapter (see also 1 Chron. ix. 2), were of another race, but had been given originally to the Levites for their service, even as the Levites—only* these by divine command, and in the place of the first-born of Israel (see Num. viii.)—had been given to Aaron for the Lord's service in His tabernacle. And traces of such are found in two scriptures. In Numbers we read, respecting the spoil taken from the Midianites, "Of the children of Israel's half, Moses took one portion of fifty, both of man and of beast, and gave them unto the Levites, which kept the charge of the tabernacle of the Lord; as the Lord commanded Moses." (Chap. xxxi. 47.) We also find that Joshua said to the Gibeonites, "There shall none of you be freed from being bondmen, and hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God." (Joshua ix. 23.)*

It is here, therefore, that we probably find the origin of the Nethinim—those who were spared from the just judgment of God; and if reduced to servile bondage, it was bondage in His mercy in connection with His house, whereby the very curse that rested on them (see Joshua ix. 23) was turned into a blessing. For what do we find? That instead of being destroyed with the sword of the Lord's host, they were

* Compare Ezra viii. 20.

rescued, and now, after the lapse of centuries, they are found in honourable association with the Lord's people, and with a heart too for the Lord's house, inasmuch as they returned from Babylon with their fellow-captives at this special moment. They are surely thus no mean foreshadowing of the objects of grace even in this dispensation. (2) Solomon's servants. Of these the information is less distinct. But we read that Solomon levied "a tribute of bond-service unto this day" of the children of the Amorites, &c., that were left in the land, whom the children of Israel also were not able utterly to destroy (1 Kings ix. 19-21); and it might have been the descendants of these who received the designation of "Solomon's servants." However this might have been, the lesson already drawn is again significant, that the least connection with the Lord's people and the Lord's things becomes a means of blessing—if not always, as it surely does not, of spiritual, yet almost ever of temporal blessing, even though it may be sometimes limited, through sin and unbelief, to length of days and earthly comfort. But with "the servants of Solomon," as with the Nethinim, there must have been more than this; for through grace they had returned, of their own desire, to aid in building the house of God at Jerusalem. The number of these two classes was three hundred and ninety-two.

We have, in the next place, two other classes occupying a peculiar and, in a sense, a most mournful position. There were some—the children of Delaiah, the children of Tobiah, the children of Nekoda, six hundred fifty and two—who could not show their

father's house and their seed, whether they were of Israel; and besides these, of the children of the priests, the children of Habaiah, the children of Koz, the children of Barzillai, &c.—“these sought their register among those that were reckoned by genealogy, but they were not found: therefore were they, as polluted, put from the priesthood.” (vv. 59-62.)

In the land of their exile the same care as to title and qualification had not been exercised. Babylon represents the corruption to which God's people are in bondage through their sins, and hence the period of their captivity was a time of carelessness, a time indeed when they were suffering under the hand of their God, but still a time of confusion and disorder; and necessarily so, inasmuch as they were without the temple, without sacrifices, and without Jehovah's presence. But now that, through the mercy of their God, there had been a recovery—a partial recovery, it is true, but one that contained within itself a distinct action of the Spirit of God—and now that Jehovah's house was once more to become their centre, they were properly exercised concerning the title of all who had returned from Babylon.

If any could not show their genealogy they had no claim to take part in the work to which they had been called; and in the case of the priests the consequence was still more grave. These—if they could not find their register—were, as polluted, put from the priesthood. They were not told that they were not priests; the ground taken was that their claim was not proven. It might be at a future time; and

hence "the Tirshatha said unto them, that they should not eat of the most holy things, till there stood up a priest with Urim and with Thummim." When that time arrived, the priest, who should be once more endowed with divine intelligence and discernment through the light and perfection of God (Urim and Thummim), might adjudge them to be truly priests; but meanwhile their claim was forfeited. Grace could restore what was lost under law; only for this they must patiently wait.

A precisely similar thing in principle was seen during the past century. It is not too much to say that, at its commencement, the Church of God in this land was completely under the domination of the world-power. The life of God's people was sustained through the ministry of a few faithful men here and there, and through the study of the word of God; but the Church as a whole was enslaved, and had been enslaved, in Babylonish captivity. Soon after a recovery took place. God wrought in the hearts of many in different places, producing great exercises of soul; and a movement was initiated, which resulted in the deliverance of numbers in many parts of the country.

The charter of their deliverance from captivity was the word of God. To it they turned day and night, and there they found both light and life. By it they judged themselves and their ways, by it they discovered the true character of their past bondage, and from it they obtained also guidance for the future. Listening to its teachings, they once again spread the Lord's table in all its simplicity. They learned that the Holy Ghost dwelt in the house of

God, and that the Lord had promised to come quickly to receive His people to Himself. Thereon they were immediately confronted with the difficulty found in this chapter—the difficulty of title and qualification to break bread at the Lord's table. In the past every good citizen might do so, and all such were often exhorted to come. No one who *claimed* to be a Christian was ever denied, while very many, whose lives contradicted their profession, were received without question. Could such practices be continued?

Then the answer was found, that only such as could "shew their father's house," or could find "their register," had the scriptural qualification for a place at the table of the Lord. In other words, unless we have peace with God, unless we know that we are children of God through the possession of the Spirit of adoption, and can thus show our Father's house, and trace our genealogy, we have not the divine title required. Profession is not enough. In a day like this, a day of restoration from captivity, there must be the ability to verify our profession from the sure word of God; for, as the apostle says, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, being many, are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread." (1 Cor. x. 16, 17.)

But it is objected; Do you not constitute yourselves judges of others? By no means. As indeed the governor said in effect to the priests in this chapter, who were put away, "You may be really priests, only you cannot produce your title. It must

be left over therefore until a priest arises with the Urim and Thummim—one who can judge according to God.” So now the burden of proof lies upon the one who desires to come to the Lord’s table, and to be thus identified with His people. If he fail to produce it, he is not excluded by those who have to do with him, but by his inability to declare his genealogy, and if he be really a member of the body of Christ, his title, albeit all is of grace, will be fully acknowledged in a future day by the Lord Himself. It is needful that this scriptural principle should be both understood and enforced.

The question of the priests goes still further. These, as we have seen, were put out from their office, the functions of which were to minister before the Lord, and to teach the people (see Exodus xxviii. ; Leviticus x. 9–11 ; Deut. x. 8 ; Malachi ii. 5–7) ; and they were also forbidden, owing to their inability to find their register, to eat of the holy things. (Compare on this subject Leviticus xxii. 1–16.) What a solemn commentary upon the practices that have obtained for centuries in Christendom! Forgetful or ignorant of the truth that all true believers, and no other, are priests (1 Peter ii.), they have devised a way of making priests—of filling their “holy” offices by a human ordination. And such, when thus appointed, arrogate to themselves the exclusive right of approach to God, as well as that of interpreting the Scriptures. It is a small thing to say that these practices are a denial of Christianity—they are worse ; for they set aside the efficacy of the work of Christ, and deny His authority, as well as ignore the sovereign action of the Holy

Ghost. God alone makes priests, and every one who is washed with water (born again) is brought under the value of the one sacrifice of Christ, is sprinkled with His precious blood, as also with the anointing oil (the unction of the Holy Spirit), is set apart by Him for this office. (Read Exodus xxix.; Hebrews x.) Such, and such alone, can find their register among those that are reckoned by genealogy, "and have liberty of access into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which He hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, His flesh" (Heb. x. 19, 20); where, by the grace of God, they are permitted to feast on the holy things—the various aspects of Christ as symbolized by these—in communion with God in His own presence.

The number of the whole congregation, we are now told, was forty and two thousand three hundred and sixty. Besides these were their servants and maids, amounting to seven thousand three hundred thirty and seven; and among them two hundred singing men and singing women. There were also seven hundred thirty and six horses, two hundred forty and five mules, four hundred thirty and five camels, and six thousand seven hundred and twenty asses. (Verses 65-67.)

Such was the large company or caravan that travelled from Babylon to Judah and Jerusalem, with their hearts set upon the holy enterprise to which they had been divinely called. But a narrower inspection of the elements of which this multitude was composed will discover the sure precursors of decline and decay. What had these pilgrims to do, for ex-

ample, with singing men and singing women? Their land was desolate, their sanctuary had been consumed with fire, and was lying waste, and they themselves were but a feeble remnant just emancipated from the yoke of captivity. Surely it was no time for mirth and song! (Compare Psalm cxxxvii.) Alas! every action of the Spirit of God, producing a revival in the hearts of His people, is speedily limited by man, and by his own thoughts and desires. Even the first response to His mighty power gathers with those who are really under His influence those also who will corrupt the movement and ensure its outward failure. How remarkably this is exemplified in the book of Judges, and has been so in every age of the Church!

Arrived at their destination, we read that some of the chief of the fathers, when they came to the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God to set it up in its place. They gave after their ability unto the treasure of the work threescore and one thousand drams of gold, and five thousand pounds of silver, and one hundred priests' garments. (Verses 68, 69.)

It is interesting to notice the form of the statement—"When they came to the house of the Lord at Jerusalem," showing that the house, whatever its outward condition, and razed to the ground as it had been, still existed before the eye of God. Thus, though there were three different houses until the time of the Lord, it was always the same house in the mind of God. Haggai, on this account, says, as it should be rendered, "The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former." (Chap. ii.) There

is undoubtedly another reason for this form of words in Ezra. God would seem to have used the desolations of His sanctuary to touch the hearts of these chief of the fathers. When they came to Jehovah's house—when they saw, as it were, its condition—they were moved, and they “offered freely” of their substance; and, as the Spirit of God is careful to notice, thus setting the seal of His approval upon the act, “they gave after their ability.” In this they are surely examples for all time for those of the Lord's people who have the privilege of ministering to the Lord, whether in having fellowship with His necessitous saints, or with the needs of His service.

The chapter closes with the statement, “So the priests, and the Levites, and some of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, dwelt in their cities.” (v. 70.) It is open to the spiritual reader to question whether this record—especially when read in the light of what took place afterward, as related in Haggai i.—is not symptomatic of the decay of their first energy, whether it does not reveal the tendency to think of themselves and their own houses before the interests of the Lord's house. Solomon spent thirteen years in building his own house, while he occupied but seven upon the temple; and knowing what man is, it is not surprising if the restored remnant began by first minding their own things. But if so, the next chapter will show that the word of God was still energetic in their souls, to the praise of Him who had redeemed them from captivity, and associated them with Himself in the thoughts of His heart towards Jerusalem, and towards His temple.

CHAPTER III.

AT the close of the last chapter we have seen that "all Israel"—the remnant in fact, but taking the place of the nation before God—dwelt in their cities. The commencement of this chapter opens out another remarkable action of the Spirit of God. "And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem." (v. 1.) In the book of Numbers we read, "In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, ye shall have an holy convocation; ye shall do no servile work; it is a day of blowing the trumpets unto you." (xxix. 1.) This feast of trumpets prefigured the restoration of Israel in the last days; and it was therefore with a true spiritual perception that the people assembled themselves in Jerusalem at this time—a perception which, combined with their perfect unity, showed that both they and their leaders had been taught of God, and were under the power of His word. (Compare Acts ii. 1.)

It is but seldom in the history of God's people that such oneness has been displayed, because it can only be produced, not by any general agreement, but by the common subjection of all alike to the power of the Spirit through the truth. Twice only has it been seen in the history of the Church (see Acts ii. iv.),

and now it will never more be displayed on earth in the Church at large, though it might perhaps be exhibited in small companies of the saints. But here, as at Pentecost, the whole congregation were as one man—one will dominating all, and gathering them with irresistible power to one common centre; for they were all with one accord in one place in the city on which the mind and heart of God were at that time set.

Having thus assembled, there “stood up Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt-offerings thereon, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God. And they set the altar upon its bases; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries; and they offered burnt-offerings thereon unto the Lord, even burnt-offerings morning and evening.” (*vv.* 2, 3.) The governor, Zerubbabel, and the priest, Jeshua (aided by their respective “brethren”), united in this blessed work, the combination of the two foreshadowing Him who will be a priest on His throne, the true Melchizedek. (See Zech. vi. 9–15.)

One of their motives in the erection of the altar would seem to have been their felt need of the protection of their God, and faith discerned that this protection would be ensured on the ground of the efficacy of the sacrifices. And what could be more beautiful than this exhibition of confidence in God? They were but a feeble remnant, having no outward means of defence, and surrounded by enemies of every kind; but their very weakness and peril had

taught them the precious lesson, that God was their refuge and strength. The setting up of the altar was therefore their first object; and as soon as the sweet savour of the burnt-offerings ascended up to God, all that He was, as then revealed, was engaged on their behalf.

It will be moreover observed that their burnt-offerings were presented morning and evening. This was called, at its original institution, the "continual burnt-offering" (see Exodus xxix. 38-46), in virtue of which God had been able to dwell in the midst of His people. And if His presence was no longer in their midst, if He dwelt no longer between the cherubim overshadowing the mercy-seat, *the efficacy of the burnt-offering remained*; and as long as faith brought this, and presented it to God morning and evening, the people were as surely under the protection of Jehovah as before; as safe as, indeed far safer than, when Jerusalem in her glory was surrounded by her fortified walls and bulwarks. They might have therefore adopted the language of one of their psalms: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof." (Psalm xlvi. 1-3.)

The altar having been duly ordered, they kept the feast of tabernacles, as it is written (see Lev. xxiii. 33-36), and offered the daily burnt-offerings by number, according to the custom, as the duty of every day required. The feast of tabernacles was a

figure of millennial joy. (Lev. xxiii. 40.) Israel was to rejoice before the Lord their God seven days. To human eyes looking at their desolate condition it might have seemed a mockery for these poor returned captives to be keeping a joyful feast. But faith is "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," and thus brings the future into present realization. Moreover, when the soul once stands before God in all the acceptance of Christ, as prefigured by the burnt-offering, it has already the certainty of every promised blessing as secured in Him. It was thus open to the believing Israelites, who stood around the altar which they had erected amid the ruins of the temple, and as they saw the smoke of the burnt-offerings ascend up to heaven, to look onward to the time when all God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would be fulfilled, and when the ransomed of the Lord would return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads; when they would obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing should flee away.

They also, we are told, "offered the continual burnt-offering, both of the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the Lord that were consecrated, and of every one that willingly offered a freewill-offering unto the Lord." (v. 5.) And it will be remarked that the striking feature of all their proceedings was, *that they ordered everything now according to the word of God.* (vv. 2, 4.) Whatever they may have practised in Babylon, whatever had been their traditional rites and customs, all these had been left behind in the scene of their captivity; and now, de-

livered and brought back, nothing could satisfy them short of the authority of the written Word.

We might therefore characterize the proceedings narrated in this passage as *the restoration of scriptural worship*. This contains a principle of immense importance, and one that has found an illustration within the memory of some who are still living. There was a movement some fifty or sixty years ago, as already pointed out in a previous chapter, corresponding largely, as to its spiritual features, with this deliverance from Babylon; and the first object of the saints at that time, as with this remnant, was the restoration of the altar (using this term as a symbol of worship), and the ordering of the assembly in all its meetings according to the written Word. Customs, traditions, observances, all rites and ceremonies, were now tested by the recorded apostolic practices, and such as could not stand the proof were abandoned. It was but a remnant also that were brought out of bondage; but they had light and life in their dwellings and in their gatherings, because "as one man" they sought to give the Lord Jesus Christ His rightful place of pre-eminence as Son over His own house. In truth, God owned this movement in a remarkable manner, using it to recall believers, in every part of the land, to the authority of the written Word, to the knowledge of the fullness of His grace in redemption, to their priestly place and privileges, to the truth of the presence of the Holy Spirit, and to the expectation of the Lord's return. And if the spiritual power of that day has not been maintained, its influence is still felt; and it is not too much to say that the whole church of

God is indebted to it, through the sovereign grace and appointment of God, for the exhibition and preservation of the full-orbed truths of Christianity.

Before that time Christianity, in the hands of its public advocates, had degenerated into a mere code of morals, and the consequence was Socinianism and widespread infidelity; whereas since that day, whatever the increasing power of evil, and the rapid development of the signs of the coming apostasy, there has never been wanting a full testimony to the truth of God, and to His Christ as glorified at His right hand. All this proclaims to us, as with a trumpet voice, that the path of obedience to the written Word, in the power of the Spirit, is both the path of recovery from error, the secret of all blessing, and the true method of arresting spiritual decline.

The first five verses of this chapter are a delightful record, and might well be studied in connection with the first days of the Church after Pentecost. (Acts ii.-iv.) In both places alike individual, as well as collective or corporate, spiritual energy is manifested. Thus it was not only the new moons and the set feasts that are noticed as having been observed, but it is added, "And every one that willingly offered a freewill-offering unto the Lord." (v. 5.) When God's Spirit is acting in power, He fills the hearts of many of His people to overflowing, and the vessel, not being able to contain the blessing, runs over in thanksgiving and praise to God. This is the secret both of devotedness and worship.

The next two verses close up this period, preparatory to the introduction of another. "From the

first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt-offerings unto the Lord. But the foundation of the temple of the Lord was not yet laid. They gave money also unto the masons, and to the carpenters; and meat, and drink, and oil, unto them of Zidon, and to them of Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa, according to the grant that they had of Cyrus king of Persia." (vv. 6, 7.) The record of the commencement of offering burnt-offerings the first day of the seventh month is made with evident delight. It was grateful to the heart of God to behold the return of His people to Himself, acknowledging His claims, and the only ground of their acceptance. It shows us how particularly He observes the actions of His own, and that He takes pleasure in their approach and worship. Producing these fruits by His grace in their hearts, with the same grace He puts them to their account. (Compare Eph. ii. 10, and 2 Cor. v. 10.)

Then follows, as we judge, a note of sadness—"But the foundation of the temple of the Lord was not yet laid." The people had responded largely to the grace and goodness of Jehovah in their restoration, they had rejoiced to place themselves under His protection, and had ordered His worship according as it was written in the law of Moses the man of God. But at present they went no farther. Instead of entering into God's thoughts respecting His house, they rested in the blessings into which they had now been brought. Their spiritual energy had in measure expended itself in their first efforts, and their temptation was now to pause before going farther. Such has ever been the history of all real

revivals in the church of God. Take, for example, that mighty work of God, of which Luther was the instrument.

At the outset the authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures was the battle-axe with which he waged war upon the corruptions and idolatries of Rome, and God wrought with him and granted a remarkable deliverance. But what followed? Luther, and his followers alike, rested in and feasted upon the fruits of their first victories, and the Reformation subsided into a system of State churches and creeds, out of which all vitality soon departed. (See Rev. iii. 1-3.) They failed to go on in communion with the mind of God—they laboured for their own objects rather than His, and the consequence was that blight and decay soon showed themselves; the movement was arrested; and now, to-day, the very truths which were then recovered are fast fading away (if they have not already gone) from the very places which were the scene of the conflict.

We learn therefore that the safety of God's people lies in their rising to the height of their calling. He calls us to fellowship with Himself, and with His Son Jesus Christ. If, forgetting this, we are satisfied with the enjoyment of our blessings, and lose sight of God's desires for us, feebleness and decline will soon mark us, whether as individuals or as companies of believers. If, on the other hand, God's objects are ours, if our minds are set upon what is before Him, He will ever lead us on into fuller intelligence of His purposes of grace, as well as of His ways, and into larger blessedness. He delights in our happiness, and He would ever increase this

by associating us in His grace with His own objects and aims.

If, however, the children of Israel did not prosecute the work of the Lord with all diligence, they were not unmindful of the purpose of their restoration; for, as we have seen, they began to make provision for the materials wherewith to build the temple. (v. 7.) To understand the circumstances of the remnant in contrast with the glory of the kingdom when Solomon's temple was built, 1 Kings v., and 1 Chron. xxviii., xxix., should be read. Together with this, it should be remembered that Jehovah was the same, and that His resources were as available, through the exercise of faith, for this feeble remnant as for David and Solomon in all their power and splendour. True, they were outwardly dependent upon the grant of a Gentile monarch for permission to build, and for the means to secure the necessary materials; but it was God's work on which they were engaged, and, counting upon Him, He would enable them to prosecute it to a successful issue. When believers work with God, their apparent difficulties and obstacles become the servants of faith to bring God in, before whom crooked things are made straight, and rough places plain.

In this section the account is given of the actual laying of the foundation of the temple. An interval of at least seven months must be placed between verses 7 and 8. How it was spent is not revealed. The ostensible ground of the pause, before commencing the work of building, would seem, from the connection, to be waiting for the "cedar trees."

However this might have been, "In the second year of their coming unto the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, began Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the remnant of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all they that were come out of the captivity unto Jerusalem; and appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to set forward the work of the house of the Lord." (v. 8.)

Three things are to be noted in this statement. Whatever the state of the people at large, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the governor and the priest, are foremost in the Lord's work. Officially at the head, they retain the spiritual lead of the people. Happy is it for the people of God in every age, when their leaders are in the secret of the Lord's mind, when they can call upon the people to follow them in His service. It is not always so: indeed, not infrequently the first action of the Spirit of God is in the midst of His people, and then the nominal leaders are set aside, or constrained to follow to preserve their place.

Secondly, the governor and the priest know how to associate the people with themselves in their sacred enterprise. This is the sure mark of spiritual power on their part, as well as a testimony to the fact that God was working with them. Thus far there were no schisms, but all were banded together by the Holy Spirit for one common object. Lastly, we find that the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, were commissioned to set forward the work of the house of the Lord. This was evidently a recurrence to the scriptural order, arising out of a divine intelligence as to the nature of the work on which they were

engaged. (See Numbers iv. ; 1 Chron. xxiii. 24.) The maintenance of God's order in the work of His house is of the first importance, for it is in fact subjection to His will as expressed in His word. To man's thoughts some other method might have seemed preferable; but the only question for the Lord's servants was, and is, What has He directed? From not perceiving this, there has been perpetual conflict in the church of God between man's will and the Lord's; and, alas! the consequence has been that man and man's thoughts have almost universally usurped the place of Christ and His word.

The Levites through grace readily entered upon their labours. There were but seventy-four. (See chap. ii. 40.)* In the wilderness, comprising only those who were "from thirty years old and upward, even unto fifty years old," they numbered "eight thousand and five hundred and eighty." (Numbers iv. 46-48.) When the Lord therefore opened the door of deliverance for them from their Babylonish captivity, very few had cared to avail themselves of it; they had found a home, alas! in the land of their exile, and had forgotten Jerusalem, and ceased to remember Zion. The more precious to the Lord was the fidelity of these seventy-four, and with His presence and blessing they were enough for His service as overseers of the workmen in the house of God. Grace too had wrought in their hearts, for they stood "together," or, as the margin reads, "as one" in their office. This was true fellowship,

* The children of Asaph, and the children of the porters (ii. 41, 42), were also Levites. Altogether, therefore, they numbered three hundred and forty-one; but only these seventy-four were available for this special work.

and sprang from the fact that they were in communion with the mind of God concerning His house. His objects were theirs, and hence they were not hampered by divided counsels; but "as one" they set forward the workmen. Blessed augury for the success of their enterprise, as well as the evident fruit of the action of the Spirit of God!

The next two verses describe the celebration of the laying of the foundation. "And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the Lord, after the ordinance of David king of Israel. And they sang together by course, in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord; because He is good, for His mercy endureth for ever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid." (vv. 10, 11.) It was a day of great joy and gladness; and as they had gone back to the word, "as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God," for directions concerning the altar, the sacrifices, and the feasts, so they have recourse to "the ordinance of David king of Israel," for guidance in their service of praise. (Compare 2 Chron. v. 12, 13.)

In the wilderness indeed we do not read of songs of joy; they had sung the song of redemption on the banks of the Red Sea, but even that soon died away on their lips, and was succeeded by the murmurs which were begotten by the hardships and perils of their pilgrim journey. But when in the land the ark

had found a resting-place, if but for a time, in Zion, David "appointed certain of the Levites to minister before the ark of the Lord, and to record, and to thank and praise the Lord God of Israel." Also Asaph and others were to play upon psalteries and harps, Asaph himself was to make a sound with cymbals, while certain priests were to blow with trumpets. "On that day David delivered first the psalm, to thank the Lord, into the hand of Asaph and his brethren," in which the words occur, "O give thanks unto the Lord; for He is good; for His mercy endureth for ever." (1 Chron. xvi.) Few and feeble therefore as were the children of Israel who gathered this day on mount Moriah, they were scrupulously exact in obedience to the Word. Engaged on the Lord's work, they discerned rightly that in it human thoughts and human wisdom had no place. The Lord and the Lord alone must prescribe the method of His house.

Three classes are distinguished in this joyful celebration: there were the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the sons of Asaph with cymbals; and there were outside of these the people who answered the praise they heard with a great shout, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. None but priests were permitted to blow with the sacred trumpets (see Numbers x.), for it needs to be in the holy place, in the presence of God, in communion with His mind, to discern when to sound the notes of testimony and praise. So likewise only the sons of Asaph—Levites, "according to the king's order"—must use the sacred cymbals. (1 Chronicles xxv. 6.) Thus duly arranged, "they sang together by course,

in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord," and the burden of their song was, "Jehovah is good, for His mercy endureth for ever toward Israel."

But there were tears of sorrow mingled with their notes of praise; for the next verse tells us of many of the priests and Levites, and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, those who had seen Solomon's temple in all its glory and splendour, and as they contrasted it with the house they were now commencing, they wept with a loud voice, while the others shouted aloud for joy. And truly the tears of the one and the gladness of the other befitted the circumstances of the day; for those who had seen the glory of the kingdom and the visible cloud of the presence of Jehovah in the first temple, and who were now spectators of the desolations of Jerusalem, and felt their present impoverished condition, and their feebleness in attempting to build anew the house of the Lord, it was but natural, whatever their gratitude, that grief should predominate. For those, on the other hand, who remembered only their captivity in Babylon, with its deprivation of both altar and temple, it could be nothing but unmingled gratitude and praise.

And who can doubt that both the tears and the gladness were alike acceptable to the Lord, inasmuch as both might equally have been the fruit of the working of His grace in their hearts? Indeed, might not a parallel be found in our own times? When the Lord brought some of His people out of their Babylonish captivity, in the present century, and they entered anew upon the possession of their priestly privileges of access and worship; when they marked

out again from the Word the true ground of the church, and sought in whatever feebleness to occupy it, their hearts, under the power of the Holy Ghost, would of necessity overflow in thanksgiving and praise. Now delivered from sacerdotal assumptions and claims, from the corruptions of the church and of Christianity, and filled with gratitude to Him who in His grace had opened their eyes, smitten off their fetters, and brought them into this wealthy place, they could but "shout aloud for joy."

On the other hand, when the ancient men, who were more deeply instructed in the Word, and who had often pondered the beauty and order of the church in Pentecostal days, compared it with their own feeble efforts to conform themselves according to the directions of the Scriptures, and when they reflected how many of their brethren had been left behind in bondage, sorrow was as appropriate as joy. There could not but be the blending of the two, so that, as in the case of the children of Israel, there might have been a difficulty in discerning "the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people."

Altogether the celebration of laying the foundation of the temple is a beautiful scene. The reader, however, will remark that, in accordance with the nature of the book and the position of the people, the record is wholly taken up with what the people did and felt. God is not visibly in the scene, though it is apparent that all is being done for and to Him. In a word, His people are acting in faith, and faith only could bring Him in, and that of necessity was an individual thing. But we are not left without

witness of God's thoughts of His people on this day. If we turn to the book of Zechariah, we shall find that He was watching His people, and interested in their doings. As yet God had not begun to speak by prophecy to His restored people, either by Haggai or by Zechariah; but when He, some years later, stirred them up and encouraged their hearts by this means, He refers to the laying of the foundation of the temple. Zechariah thus speaks: "The word of the Lord came unto me, saying, The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also finish it; and thou shalt know that the Lord of hosts hath sent me unto you. For who hath despised the day of small things? for they shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel with those seven; they are the eyes of the Lord, which run to and fro through the whole earth." (Chap. iv. 8-10.)

We thus learn how precious to God was the commencement of His house. His heart was set upon it, and He ever rejoices when His people understand His thoughts, and, with intelligence of His mind, seek to be found in the path of His will. Zerubbabel had laid the foundation, and he also should finish it; and this should be a sign to the people that the Lord had sent His servant. It might be a day of small things, as measured by the outward eye; but it was a day which contained within itself the promise of the restoration of the kingdom in glory, under the sway of the promised Messiah (see Zechariah vi. 12, 13), and it was the privilege of faith to link itself, in this day of small things, with the full accomplishment of the purposes of God towards His people.

Moreover, the eyes of the Lord—"those seven," His perfect intelligence and cognizance of all things, for they are the eyes of the Lord which run to and fro through the whole earth—should rejoice, and see the plummet in the hands of Zerubbabel; *i.e.*, when His house should be completed. In the previous chapter these seven eyes are upon the foundation-stone. "Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, thou, and thy fellows that sit before thee: for they are men wondered at: for, behold, I will bring forth my servant, THE BRANCH. For behold the stone that I have laid before Joshua; upon one stone shall be seven eyes: behold, I will engrave the graving thereof, saith the Lord of hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day. In that day, saith the Lord of hosts, shall ye call every man his neighbour under the vine and under the fig tree." (Chap. iii. 8-10.)

This scripture reveals to us the full significance in the thoughts of God of the laying of the foundation of His house by the remnant in Jerusalem. It was the assurance of the introduction of Christ, the Branch, who should secure to His people the promised blessing. So looked at, it is God that was doing all, if His people were the instruments. He laid the foundation-stone (compare Isa. xxviii. 16), though it were by the hands of Zerubbabel. It was His work, inasmuch as it was the fulfilment of His counsels. His eyes were upon the stone—that stone of grace and blessing; for indeed it was "a tried stone, a precious corner-stone, a sure foundation"—and He Himself would engrave the graving; that is, He would unfold and declare all its divine import; and

then He would remove the iniquity of the land in one day. For truly it was through His death and resurrection that Christ would become the Saviour of His people from their sins, and thus the foundation-stone on which His people should be built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ (1 Peter ii. 4, 5), and on which His people Israel should also rest, and trusting in which they should never be confounded. The consequence therefore should be full earthly blessing, every man calling his neighbour under the vine and under the fig tree.

Combining the above scriptures with the narrative in Ezra will enable the reader to view the proceedings of that day with a double interest. If in Ezra the Spirit of God would associate us with the thoughts and feelings of the people in connection with their work, in Zechariah He draws us into fellowship with the thoughts of God. The people, it may be, saw but little beyond the promise of the restoration of the temple and its services; but God, with whom a thousand years are as one day, beheld in that day of small things the commencement of His work of grace and power, in virtue of which He would accomplish all His counsels through the advent, death, appearing, and reign of His anointed—His King, whom He would one day establish on His holy hill of Zion.

CHAPTER IV.

N O sooner had the foundation of the temple been laid than adversaries appeared on the scene. It was so also in New Testament times; for wherever the apostle went, laying the foundation of the assembly, the activity of the enemy was excited. Hence his warning, "According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. iii. 10, 11.) But as with Paul, so also with Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the enemy assumed the guise of friendship. "Now 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 Esarhaddon king of Assur, which brought us up hither." (vv. 1, 2.)

The reader is not left in doubt for a single moment as to the character of these would-be helpers of God's people in their work. The Holy Spirit tells us plainly that they were "the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin," although the words of peace were upon their lips; for He knew their hearts, their aims and

ends. And indeed they betray themselves in the very words they use. It is ever so; for the mere professor cannot understand the things of God. They say, "We do sacrifice unto Him" (God) "since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assur, which brought us up hither." They revealed in this way their true origin; they were, by their own confession, not the children of Abraham, but Assyrians, and had therefore no claim to be of the children of Israel. These were, in fact, the fathers of the Samaritans (see 2 Kings xvii. 24-41) who continued down to the very end of the Jewish economy, to seek to intrude themselves into the place of privilege and blessing. It was on this account, and because of the strife thereby engendered, that the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans. We may learn for ourselves from this incident the source of one of the gravest dangers in the work of the Lord. The kisses of an enemy are both deceitful and dangerous, though it seems so ungracious to refuse the proffered help of professed friends. The Church to her loss has not only forgotten this truth, but has also sought on system the aid of the world in her work. She has thus become both corrupt and corrupting, illustrating anew the old proverb, "The corruption of the best thing is the worst corruption."

Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and their fellow-builders, were endowed with divine perception, and hence alive to the wile of the foe. They replied to this seductive offer, "Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the Lord God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us." (v. 3.) It may

seem to some that these leaders of the people were taking up a narrow and exclusive position, and in fact they were; but in so doing they had the Lord's mind, and were resting on a divine principle which still abides; viz., that only the Lord's people can be engaged in the work of His house. Others may call themselves builders, and profess a desire to help on His work, but they can only build in wood, hay, or stubble; and the apostle has uttered the solemn warning voice for all ages, "If any man defile" (corrupt) "the temple of God, him shall God destroy." (1 Cor. iii. 17.) No possible straits or difficulties, no circumstances whatever, can justify the alliance of the Church with the world, the acceptance of the world's favour or assistance in the holy work of the Lord. Not of the world, even as Christ was not of the world, it is to deny both our character and that of the world itself, if we break down the everlasting distinction between ourselves and it, which has been revealed in the cross of Christ. (See Gal. vi. 14; John xv. 18-21.)

The true nature of the offer these adversaries of Judah and Benjamin had made is seen by the effect produced by its refusal. For what do we read? "Then 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, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even unto the reign of Darius king of Persia." (vv. 4, 5.) Thus failing in their object of corrupting the work on which the children of the captivity were engaged, they now throw off the mask of friendship, and seek to hinder by open hostility. Such is

There are several points of instruction to be noted in the record of their proceedings. The first is the union of all the various races of the land "against Jerusalem." "Rehum the chancellor, and Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their companions; the Dinaites, the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites, the Apharsites, the Archevites, the Babylonians, the Susanchites, the Dehavites, and the Elamites, and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Asnapper brought over, and set in the cities of Samaria" (*v. 9, 10*)—all these were banded together to frustrate the work of the Lord in the building of His house. The carnal mind is enmity against God, and there is therefore no difficulty, when God and His testimony are in question, in securing unity of aim and purpose amongst His enemies. Differ as they may amongst themselves, and even hating one another, they have but one mind when God appears on the scene. This was remarkably illustrated in the case of our blessed Lord, when the kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers took counsel together against Jehovah, and against His Anointed. (*Psalm ii.*) Even Herod and Pilate, who before had been at enmity between themselves, were made friends together by their common contempt of Christ.

It was in this way that Satan was proved to be the god of the world, for he succeeded in uniting the highest and the lowest against the Son of God, and marshalling all together—Romans and Jews, the civil, the ecclesiastical, and the military authorities, as well as the common people—he led on his army,

animated by his own mind and spirit, to cut off Christ out of the land of the living. Once more in the world's history he will prove his power over the hearts of sinful men, but then to his own, and, alas! also to their everlasting destruction. (See Rev. xix., xx.) So in our chapter, Satan, though concealed, is the active agent in stirring up these various peoples in their action against the work of the remnant.

This is seen in the next point to be noticed. In the letter addressed to the king they say, "Be it known unto the king, that the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, building the rebellious and bad city, and have set up the walls thereof, and joined the foundations." (v. 12.) This statement betrays the speech of the "accuser of the brethren;" for it was false, and proceeded therefore from Satan, for "when he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own; for he is a liar, and the father of it." So far indeed from having set up the walls and joined the foundations of the city, they had barely laid the foundation of the temple. And the reader will perceive that, though these "adversaries of Judah and Benjamin" had professed a desire to help in building the temple, on the ground that they also sacrificed to the God of Israel, they omit all reference in their accusation to the temple, and speak only of the city. Their reason was obvious. The proclamation of Cyrus was concerning the temple. If therefore they accused the Jews of building the city, they gave a colour to the charges of rebellion and treasonable practices which they insinuated; and

Satan's method of proceeding in every age. He and his servants will often transform themselves into angels of light and ministers of righteousness, because it is easier to deceive than to deter the saints; but the moment his presence and activity are detected and exposed, his rage is unbounded. How could he seek to advance the building of God's house? The foundation is Christ; "and what communion hath light with darkness? and what concord hath Christ with Belial?" (2 Cor. vi.) But, alas! Satan in the case before us gained a temporary advantage; for through his machinations, working on the fears and the unbelief of the people, he succeeded in stopping the building of the temple, even until the reign of Darius, king of Persia.

It will be perceived that these two verses (4 and 5) are a summary of the activity of the foes of Israel during the reigns of Cyrus, Ahasuerus, and Artaxerxes; and that therefore verse 24 is connected with verse 5, the intervening passage being a parenthesis which gives an account of the way in which the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin succeeded in their designs. Moreover it would seem, from a careful comparison of the prophecies of Haggai with this chapter, that the children of Israel ceased to build long before the prohibition was obtained; for it is evident from Haggai ii. 15, that they had made but little, if any, progress after the foundation was completed. Fear of their adversaries was stronger than their faith in God; and consequently losing heart, and thinking only of themselves and their own selfish interests, they began to build their own houses, and to say, "The time is not come that the Lord's house

should be built." (Haggai i.) It is true that they were but a feeble remnant, and that their enemies were numerous and active; but they might have read, in one of their own Psalms, "When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes, came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell. Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear: though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident. One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in His temple." (Psalm xxvii. 2-4.) But, alas! our own hearts understand but too well both the weakness and the fear of these poor captives, and how easily we are disheartened by a demonstration of the enemy's power when we forget that, if God be for us, none can succeed in their designs against us, when, in other words, we walk by sight and not by faith. The failure of God's people in this chapter is therefore but the failure of His servants in all ages.

From verses 6-23, as already pointed out, we have the particulars of the way in which the adversaries of God's people secured a royal decree in their favour, and against the building of the temple. Their attempt in the reign of Ahasuerus seems to have failed (*v.* 6), but nothing daunted they persevered with their object in the reign of his successor, Artaxerxes, and then their efforts were rewarded.*

* This is scarcely the place to discuss the question as to who were Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes. There is great difficulty in identifying them now with the monarchs of profane history. Probably the first was Xerxes, and the second Artaxerxes Longimanus. The reader may consult on the subject any good Bible Dictionary.

There are several points of instruction to be noted in the record of their proceedings. The first is the union of all the various races of the land "against Jerusalem." "Rehum the chancellor, and Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their companions; the Dinaites, the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites, the Apharsites, the Archevites, the Babylonians, the Susanchites, the Dehavites, and the Elamites, and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Asnapper brought over, and set in the cities of Samaria" (vv. 9, 10)—all these were banded together to frustrate the work of the Lord in the building of His house. The carnal mind is enmity against God, and there is therefore no difficulty, when God and His testimony are in question, in securing unity of aim and purpose amongst His enemies. Differ as they may amongst themselves, and even hating one another, they have but one mind when God appears on the scene. This was remarkably illustrated in the case of our blessed Lord, when the kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers took counsel together against Jehovah, and against His Anointed. (Psalm ii.) Even Herod and Pilate, who before had been at enmity between themselves, were made friends together by their common contempt of Christ.

It was in this way that Satan was proved to be the god of the world, for he succeeded in uniting the highest and the lowest against the Son of God, and marshalling all together—Romans and Jews, the civil, the ecclesiastical, and the military authorities, as well as the common people—he led on his army,

animated by his own mind and spirit, to cut off Christ out of the land of the living. Once more in the world's history he will prove his power over the hearts of sinful men, but then to his own, and, alas! also to their everlasting destruction. (See Rev. xix., xx.) So in our chapter, Satan, though concealed, is the active agent in stirring up these various peoples in their action against the work of the remnant.

This is seen in the next point to be noticed. In the letter addressed to the king they say, "Be it known unto the king, that the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, building the rebellious and bad city, and have set up the walls thereof, and joined the foundations." (v. 12.) This statement betrays the speech of the "accuser of the brethren;" for it was false, and proceeded therefore from Satan, for "when he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own; for he is a liar, and the father of it." So far indeed from having set up the walls and joined the foundations of the city, they had barely laid the foundation of the temple. And the reader will perceive that, though these "adversaries of Judah and Benjamin" had professed a desire to help in building the temple, on the ground that they also sacrificed to the God of Israel, they omit all reference in their accusation to the temple, and speak only of the city. Their reason was obvious. The proclamation of Cyrus was concerning the temple. If therefore they accused the Jews of building the city, they gave a colour to the charges of rebellion and treasonable practices which they insinuated; and

from the king's answer it is clear that they had not miscalculated. (vv. 19, 20.)

Another point not to be passed over is, that the sin of Israel in the past bears bitter fruit for these children of the captivity. Their last king, Zedekiah, had "sworn by God" to be faithful to Nebuchadnezzar; but he broke his oath, and rebelled against the king of Babylon, and thus procured the destruction of Jerusalem, as well as incurred the judgment of God. (See 2 Chron. xxxvi. 13; Ezekiel xvii. 12-16.) There was truth therefore in the accusation that Jerusalem had been a rebellious city; so that while the remnant themselves were under the favour and protection of God, and no one could harm them as long as they went forward in confidence in Him, they now suffered, in His government in this world, the consequence of the sins of their fathers. It is still to be emphasized that these adversaries could have had no power as against the people of God, if the people themselves had not lost faith in God and heart for their work. The apostle wrote, "A great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries" (1 Cor. xvi. 9); but not one of his opponents could have hindered his work, because he was counting on Him who "openeth, and no man shutteth." So had it been with the remnant but for their own sloth and unbelief; for, as already pointed out, they ceased, it would seem, from their work before the prohibition was obtained.

The two motives urged on the king were provision against future danger, and the possibility of loss of revenue. Thus appealed to, and the state-

ments made concerning the character of the city in past days having been verified by the records in the royal archives, he wrote, "Give ye now commandment to cause these men to cease, and that this city be not builded, until another commandment shall be given from me. Take heed now that ye fail not to do this: why should damage grow to the hurt of the kings?" (vv. 17-22.) The adversaries were thus successful, and having received the letter, went up with all speed, armed with royal authority, and effectually provided against any attempt to continue the work of building Jehovah's house. They "made them cease," it says, "by force and power."

The chapter then closes with the statement, "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." (v. 24.) This last verse, however, connects itself with verse 5, and gives the result of the enemy's opposition, of which verses 4 and 5 contain a general summary. The parenthesis gives the details of the way in which Artaxerxes was prevailed upon to issue his decree. Altogether it is a sad chapter—the account of the activity of Satan. The only bright gleam in it is the faithfulness of the leaders of Israel in refusing the alliance of the world. The rest of the chapter is darkness. God does not appear in it; and, looked at with human eyes, it would seem as if the enemy had completely conquered. While, however, God does not interpose, He is no uninterested spectator of what is taking place. Whatever His people are, He abides faithful; and we shall see that, though He will have His people thoroughly tested, He only

waits for the proper moment to raise up a power which the enemy will not be able to withstand, and with which He will arouse His servants from their slumbers, and urge them onward in the prosecution of the object for which they had been brought back from Babylon.

CHAPTER V.

IN the last chapter we saw how the people were turned aside from their work by the activity of Satan. In the first two verses of this chapter we have the record of God's intervention, by His prophets, on His people's behalf, in order to overthrow the enemy's designs.

The reader will recall the special position of these restored captives. Though brought back, in the mercy of God, to their own land, they could not have Jehovah's visible presence in their midst, as in the days of the kingdom; for He had transferred the sovereignty of the earth to the Gentiles. Fire no longer came down from heaven to consume their sacrifices, and the priests were without the sacred Urim and Thummim. (Chap. ii. 63.) God therefore was now purely the object of faith, and the godly had to endure as seeing Him who was invisible.

On this very account it was that God came in, not by any act of power to confound the adversary, but by the word of prophecy to reach the conscience of His people, and to stir them up to confidence in Himself; and thereby to strengthen them for the conflict which their labours would involve, as well as to assure them that as long as they trusted in Him the utmost efforts of their enemies would be in vain. And herein we learn the true function of the prophet.

As another has said, "Prophecy supposes that the people of God are in a bad condition, even when they are still acknowledged and prophecy addressed to them. There is no need of addressing powerful testimony to a people who are walking happily in the ways of the Lord, nor of sustaining the faith of a tried remnant by hopes founded on the unchangeable faithfulness of God, when all are enjoying in perfect peace the fruits of His present goodness—attached, as a consequence, to the faithfulness of the people. The proof of this simple and easily-understood principle is found in each of the prophets."

It should, moreover, be pointed out, that the prophet was raised up as the medium for communication with the people of God when the responsible head or heads of the people had failed. Thus when the priesthood had failed under Eli, Samuel was God's chosen vessel for His messages to His people, and his ministry continued through the reign of Saul, or at least until David was anointed king. This explains the fact that the greatest of the prophets appeared on the scene at the darkest periods of the history of Israel, as, for example, Elijah and Elisha. So in our chapter Zerubbabel, the governor, and Jeshua, the high priest, were the responsible heads of the captivity; but, worn out by the harassing attacks of their adversaries, they had also succumbed with the people, and had with them ceased to build the house of the Lord. God therefore now sent prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, and they "prophesied unto the Jews that were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, even unto them." (v. 1.)

As a matter of fact Haggai (as may be seen by a comparison of the dates of their respective prophecies) received his first message from Jehovah two months before Zechariah was employed, and it is worthy of notice as indicative of their failure that his first errand was to Zerubbabel and Jeshua. (See Haggai i. 1.) It is of the utmost importance (as shown in our exposition of Haggai) that the messages of the prophets should be read in connection with Ezra; for it is in these that the true condition of the people is discovered. It is evident that it was not only the fear of the enemy that led them to desist from their work, but that also their own hearts were settling down upon their own ease and comfort. They found time to build their own houses while saying, "The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built." (Haggai i. 1-5.) Alas! how often is it the case that the people of God, forgetting that their citizenship is in heaven, and that therefore they are pilgrims, bend their efforts to build houses for themselves in a scene of death and judgment. So the children of the captivity, untouched by the sight of the desolations of Jehovah's house, lying waste as it was, turned aside to erect "ceiled houses" for themselves. But God was not indifferent to the state of His house, if they were, and He "blew upon" all the increase of the field because of His house that lay waste, while they were running every man to his own house. (Haggai i. 6-9.)

It was to this state of things that Haggai was sent to call attention; and his words were clothed with such energy and power, that in a little more than

three weeks the chiefs of the people, and the people themselves, were aroused from their selfish apathy, and they obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him; and the people did fear before the Lord. (Compare Haggai i. 1 with vv. 12-15.) It would seem, then, that verse 1 of our chapter is a general statement of the work of the prophets, and that in verse 2 we have, in fact, the effect of Haggai's first message; or it may be also the general effect of the prophetic work amongst the people. "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." This last expression will refer to the continuous work of the prophets during the progress of the building, by which Jehovah encouraged His people to persevere in their labours, unfolding before them the glory of the future in connection with the advent of Messiah and the establishment of His kingdom. The people builded, and the prophets prophesied, both alike filling their appointed places, and both alike fulfilling their task in fellowship with the mind of God. If the prophets spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost (2 Peter i. 21), it was Jehovah who stirred up the spirit of the builders (Hag. i. 14); and hence all alike laboured in the power of the Spirit, and all occupied the places assigned to them by the sovereign action of the grace of God.

The reader should again be reminded that the people did not wait for the renewal of their com-

mission to build from the Gentile authorities. No doubt they were in subjection to the powers that were ordained of God, and that a decree had been obtained forbidding them to build; but God Himself had spoken, and if, therefore, they were to render to Cæsar the things that were Cæsar's, they were also to render to God the things that were God's. When God condescends to speak, His claims are supreme, paramount to every consideration, whatever may be the consequences entailed. This principle was recognized by the builders of a later day, Peter and John, who, when forbidden to speak or teach in the name of Jesus, replied, "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." (Acts iv. 19, 20.) In truth, faith links itself with God Himself, with His objects and His power, and can thus peacefully leave every other question with Him. Hence these children of the captivity obeyed the voice of their God, and went forward with their work, knowing that He held the hearts of all men in His hands, and that He could—as He did in the issue—use even the opposition of their enemies to further the work of His house. The record of the manner in which God manifested that He was above all the proud devices of the adversary is contained in the rest of this, and the following, chapter. First, we have the action of the Gentile governor, with his companions. We read:

"At the same time came to them Tatnai, governor on this side the river, and Shethar-boznai, and their companions, and said thus unto them, Who hath commanded you to build this house, and to

make up this wall? Then said we unto them after this manner, What are the names of the men that make this building?" (vv. 3, 4.)

The governor, in making this enquiry, was undoubtedly within his rights, and acting in the interests of his sovereign, inasmuch as a decree prohibiting the building of the city, if not of the temple, had been issued. He could know nothing of any commandment except that of his own king. The children of this world can never understand the claims of God upon His people, and it always seems folly to them that any should brave the displeasure of an earthly monarch to please One in whom they themselves do not believe.

The fourth verse is somewhat ambiguous. Comparing it with verse 10, it is evident that the "we" of verse 4 applies to the enemies of Israel. It was they who asked, "What are the names of the men that make this building?"—their object being to report these transgressors of his commandment to the king. It is still Satan working behind the scene; and whenever God acts on the earth through His people, Satan immediately counterworks. This will be the force of the words, "At the same time." (v. 3.) We do not read of any persecution of the people during the time of which Haggai speaks, when they were building their own houses. But at once, on their resumption of their work upon Jehovah's house, they are met by new wiles—indeed, open opposition.

The house of Jehovah was the testimony for that day, and it is this which Satan always hates. If believers settle down in the world, mind earthly

things, become "dwellers on earth"—using this phrase in its moral sense—Satan will let them alone; but the moment, wrought upon by the Spirit of God, they apprehend His mind, and go forth in living testimony, the adversary will seek to turn them aside by any art or device which is likely to accomplish his purpose. We have a striking and perfect illustration of this principle in the life of our blessed Lord, as well as the exhibition of Satan's powerlessness to touch His people as long as they are maintained in dependence and obedience. (See Matt. iv.)

On the other hand, if Satan is merciless in his opposition, God is not indifferent to the needs and weaknesses of His servants when engaged in the conflict. We are thus told, immediately after this new effort of the enemy to deter the Jews from their work, "But 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." The eye of God was upon His beloved people, beholding their danger, in order that He might minister the needed courage in the presence of the foe, to give them the consciousness of His presence and shelter, and thus to animate them to perseverance in their work. And indeed it is a wonderful thing for our souls when we in any measure realize that the eye of God is upon us. It produces in us that holy fear which makes us fearless of man, and also gives us the sweet sense of the overshadowing presence and protection of Him who has in His grace bound us to Himself by imperishable ties, while it brings to our lips the victorious challenge of the apostle, "If God be for us, who

can be against us?" We are thus enabled to pursue the path of service to which we have been called in calm and peace, though surrounded by powerful enemies, because we are assured of the omnipotent succour of our God. It acts as an incentive both to perseverance and fidelity.

We have, in the next place, the copy of the letter which Tatnai and his companions sent to King Darius, from which fuller details of their visit to Jerusalem may be gathered. A brief analysis of this letter will be both interesting and profitable. They were evidently impressed with the work of the feeble Jews, for they tell the king, "We went into the province of Judea, to the house of the great God, which is builded with great stones, and timber is laid in the walls, and this work goeth fast on, and prospereth in their hands." (v. 8.) Unlike the letter given in the former chapter, this gives at least a faithful report of the facts, though the object of both was to stop the progress of the work; while the enemy in this case bears testimony to the diligence and devotedness of the builders.

The next two verses (9, 10) are a repetition of verses 3 and 4, for the information of the king; and then from verses 11-16 we have the answer which the elders of the Jews returned to their interrogators. Nothing could be more simple and beautiful than the way in which they give their own history, and that of the temple on the building of which they were engaged. In the very forefront of all they declare themselves as "the servants of the God of heaven and earth." In dealing with the wiles of Satan there is no weapon more potent than the bold con-

fession of our true character. The beginning of Peter's fall, or rather the first outward step towards it, was his denial that he belonged to Jesus of Nazareth. And how often since that day has it been the precursor of shame and defeat! Blessed was it therefore that these Jews were able to take their stand upon this open confession that they were God's servants: it was blessed for their own souls, the result surely of knowing that the eye of God was upon them, and it was at the same time their complete justification for commencing their work in spite of the king's decree. Moreover, they narrated the cause of the destruction of the house in past days. Their "fathers had provoked the God of heaven unto wrath," and He had given them "into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house, and carried the people away into Babylon." (vv. 11, 12.)

What a history! Solomon had built the house, and Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed it, and the cause of all this sorrow was their fathers' sins. And what a tale of long-suffering grace and mercy was included between these two dates; and, alas! what a revelation of the heart of man—under divine culture as it was! In a word, between those two epochs is contained the history of the kingdom under man's responsibility, established in glory and splendour under Solomon as prince of peace (David was the first king, but it was the erection of the temple that marked the *establishment* of the kingdom) and destroyed in the reign of weak and wicked Zedekiah. (Read 2 Chron. xxxvi. 11–21.) Furthermore, they explain that the work on which they were employed

was the result of a decree of Cyrus, in proof of which they told how he had committed to their care the vessels of gold and silver belonging to the temple, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken away. (*v. 13-15.*) They added, "Then came the same Sheshbazzar, and laid the foundation of the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and since that time, even until now, hath it been in building, and yet it is not finished." (*v. 16.*) If the account, so given by the Jews, were correct, they were entirely justified even in the eyes of man; for it was a well-known characteristic of the laws of the Medes and Persians (and Cyrus was king of Persia) that they could not be changed (*Dan. vi. 8, 14, 15, &c.*), and their adversaries were shown to be in error through ignorance of the law.

Hence the letter now sent concludes with the request, "Now therefore, if it seem good to the king, let there be search made in the king's treasure-house, which is there at Babylon, whether it be so, that a decree was made of Cyrus the king to build this house of God at Jerusalem, and let the king send his pleasure to us concerning this matter." (*v. 17.*)

CHAPTER VI.

THE king thus appealed to ordered the search to be made, and the decree of Cyrus was found. (vi. 1-5.) The statement of the Jews was thus confirmed in every particular, and even more; for it was now discovered that Cyrus had not only issued his decree for the rebuilding of the temple, but had also ordered "the expenses to be given out of the king's house," as well as directed the restoration of the sacred vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had taken away.

Acting then upon this decree, Darius commanded Tatnai, Shetharboznai, and their companions to cease to molest the Jews, and to allow them to continue their work in peace. God was manifestly to faith working behind the scenes, and using the power of the enemy for the accomplishment of His own purposes; affording another instance of how He causes all things to work together for good to them that love Him. For not only did Darius, on the interposition of their adversaries, confirm the decree of Cyrus, but he also issued another to the effect that all the necessary provision for the house of God should be made at his expense.

He says, "Moreover, I make a decree what ye shall do to the elders of these Jews, for the building of this house of God: that, of the king's goods, even of the tribute beyond the river, forthwith expences 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 which are at Jerusalem, let it be given them day by day without fail: that they may offer sacrifices of sweet savours unto the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king, and of his sons." (vi. 8-10.)

When a man's ways please the Lord, He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him (Prov. xvi. 7); and when found, therefore, in the path of His will, he may safely leave his enemies in the Lord's hands. So these elders of the Jews discovered, and they might have learned the lesson often taught in the word of God, and ever needed by His people, "They that be with us are more than they that be with them."

Thus God Himself was the shield of His people while they were engaged in His service; and as long as they were obedient to His word, and counting upon Him for strength and defence, it was not possible for them to be hindered. In this way Satan once more overreached himself, and was used to further the work that he hated; just as the apostle wrote in after centuries, "I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel." (Phil. i. 12.) When Satan succeeded in shutting Paul up in prison, he thought he had gained a victory, even as he did in the most notable case of all, when he urged the Jews to demand the crucifixion of their Messiah; but in both instances his

apparent success was a most disastrous defeat. We may well, therefore, whatever the opposition or persecution, go calmly forward, courageous in perseverance, because it is the Lord's work on which we are engaged, and He has said, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the ages."

Darius went still further. He added, "Also I have made a decree, that whosoever shall alter this word, let timber be pulled down from his house, and, being set up, let him be hanged thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this. 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. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with speed." (vv. 11, 12.) The king thus surrounded the Jews with his authority, and guarded them against further molestation by attaching the penalty of death to interference with their work. And from the language employed, it can scarcely be doubted that Darius had himself some knowledge of "the God of heaven," for he speaks of Him as causing "His name to dwell there." Be this as it may, God disposed his heart in favour of His people and of the work of building His house. The effect of the decree was instantaneous, for we read that Tatnai and his companions "did speedily" according to that which Darius had sent, and forthwith all opposition ceased, and the enemies of the work disappeared from the scene.

Not only had the opposition to the work of the house of God now ceased; but God, in His care for His people, and in response to their faith, had also

turned the heart of the king toward them; so that his royal power had now become their shelter and defence. Hence we read:

“And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo: and they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. And this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.” (v. 14, 15.)

Before entering upon the particulars of this statement, we may recall to the minds of our readers a striking parallel from the history of the building of the house of God in the New Testament. In connection with the death of Stephen, there arose “a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judæa and Samaria, except the apostles.”

Soon after, on the visit of Saul, after his conversion (we say after his conversion, in fact several years had elapsed (see Gal. i.); but we speak of the order of the narrative), to Jerusalem, opposition was once more aroused, and the Grecians went about to slay Saul; and the brethren sent him forth to Tarsus. (Acts ix. 29, 30.) The statement follows: “Then had the churches rest throughout all Judæa and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified (built up); and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.”

(Acts ix. 31.) God had given them rest from persecuting enemies, and they, by His grace, used the opportunity to build themselves up upon their most holy faith. So was it with the elders of the Jews. They builded, and they were encouraged by the comfort of the Holy Ghost as ministered by the prophets.

It is of importance to notice these two classes—the builders and the prophets. As pointed out, when expounding Haggai, these two characters of service can never be confounded. A builder cannot assume the functions of a prophet, nor could a prophet exchange his prophetic mantle for the trowel of the builder. Hence the apostle says, “Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of the faith; or ministry (service), let us wait on our ministering.” (Rom. xii. 6, 7.) A builder is one whose work it is to lay stones upon the foundation; one, that is, who is used of God, by preaching or teaching, to gather souls, to bring them as living stones to the foundation, which is Jesus Christ. (See 1 Cor. iii.) A prophet is one who both urges the people forward in their work by the communication of the mind of God, and who also tests everything by His word. A prophet sets the conscience in the presence of God, maintains, therefore, the sense of responsibility, and ministers guidance, rebuke, or exhortation according to the need of the moment, speaking as he is moved by the Holy Ghost—now, of course, through the written Word, but guided of the Spirit to the word suited to the case.

Thus the elders of Israel laboured, and the prophets prophesied; and it is also recorded that “they

prospered through the prophesying," etc. The reason is evident. The Holy Spirit was acting in power, first through the prophets, and, secondly, in producing a response to the word of God, as ministered by the prophets, in the hearts of the builders. All through the history of the kingdom the nation prospered when they heeded the voices of their prophets; and, on the other hand, every evil consequence flowed from disregard of these heaven-sent admonitions and warnings. Nor is it different in the church of God. Whenever "the builders" are attentive to the prophets who unfold and apply the mind of God as revealed in His word, they prosper, their work is durable, and they themselves receive blessing. But if they are careless of divine guidance and monition, and work after their own thoughts, they do but corrupt the work upon which they are engaged, and introduce wood, hay, and stubble in the place of gold, silver, and precious stones. Their work may seem greater, and even more prosperous, to the eye of man; but it remains to be tested at a future day, and the Lord alone is the judge of true prosperity of service.

There was now no further interruption, for they continued their work until they had finished it; and, as the Spirit of God carefully notes, it was finished "according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment (or decree) of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia." All was done, therefore, in obedience to God, and by the permission of the earthly power to which, by God's appointment, they were in subjection. Blessed privilege for these workmen so to

have laboured, and no small honour, it may be added, for these Gentile monarchs thus to be associated with and to be used for the execution of the purposes of God! No doubt—and the lesson ought not to be passed over—the names of the kings are thus mentioned to show, for one reason, the value God attaches to the principle of obedience to constituted authority.

The only limit, as before pointed out, is where the “powers that be” intrude their claims into the province in which God is supreme. The moment human authority clashes with the claims of God over the soul it becomes null and void. With this exception (Acts iv. 19) the believer has ever to submit to the powers that are ordained of God. (Rom. xiii.)

Then the date is added on which the house was completed. It was on the third day of the month of Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king. That is, there were four years occupied from the recommencement of the building until its completion. (Chap. iv. 24.) How many years had passed away since the foundation was laid cannot be exactly ascertained, inasmuch as the length of the reign of the sovereigns between Cyrus and Darius is not given. It could scarcely have been less, and was probably more, than twenty years. With what long-suffering and patience God had borne with the failures of His people. And now that His purpose is accomplished, and the house builded, with what delight He calls our attention to the labours of His people. Although all had been wrought by His grace, in that same grace He reckons to His people that which He Himself had wrought. And so it

ever has been, and will be, as the judgment-seat of Christ will abundantly testify. For if any of us receive for the good things we have done in the body, we shall confess to His praise that He Himself was the source and the power of all the good works which He has been pleased to commend.

Jehovah's house being now completed, we have in the next place the account of the dedication.

“And the children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy, and offered at the dedication of this house of God an hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs; and for a sin-offering for all Israel, twelve he goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. 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.” (vv. 16-18.)

It was but natural that they should rejoice at such a moment, for the house of their God was the expression of all the blessings of the covenant in which they stood. And at length, after weary years of failure, difficulties, disappointments, and sorrow, it stood completed before their eyes. It was for this that they had been brought up out of Babylon, and if any of them had sown in tears they now reaped in joy. But their own feebleness, and the poverty of their circumstances, may be seen by contrasting this dedication with that of Solomon's temple. Then the king offered a sacrifice of twenty and two thousand oxen, and an hundred and twenty thousand sheep, besides sheep and oxen which could not be

told nor numbered for multitude, which were sacrificed before the ark. (2 Chron. vii. 5; v. 6.) If they had dwelt on this aspect, their joy, as on laying the foundation, might well have been accompanied with lamentation and tears. Faith, however, has to do with unseen things, and it could thus recall to the mind of this feeble remnant that Jehovah was no less mighty and no less merciful for them than for Solomon.

The house might be less glorious, and they themselves but poor subjects of a Gentile monarch; but if God was for them, as He was, the resources available for faith were as unbounded as ever. This truth cannot be too deeply impressed on our minds, that Christ remains the same for His people in a day of difficulty as in a season of prosperity. To be in the power of this raises us, as nothing else can, above our circumstances, and gives us courage to press onward whatever the perils of the path.

And faith was in exercise in these children of the captivity; for we find that they offered a sin-offering for all Israel. All Israel was not there—only representatives of two or three tribes; but these few were on the ground of the nation before God, and they understood this, and thus included in their sin-offering all the tribes of Israel. This is surely a significant lesson for the remnant gathered out in these last days to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. They may be but few, and both poor and feeble; but if they enter into the truth of their position, they will include in their hearts and in their prayers all the members of the one body. In spirit they will occupy the ground on which they have been set “with all

the saints;" or otherwise they will but add another to the many sects which already divide the Church of God. This becomes easy when faith is in lively exercise; for the faith that on the one hand links itself with God, on the other links itself with all His people.

They were also characterized at this moment by obedience. They regulated the service of the house—the priests and the Levites, "as it is written in the book of Moses." The path of obedience, whether for the individual or for the assembly, is the only path of blessing. At such a time—just when the house of God was completed—it would have appeared folly to them for man to have intruded his thoughts into the house of God. Their only concern was to know what God had said—what He had directed. So was it when the house of God was built at Pentecost, in the apostolic church; and so was it when God graciously permitted the revival of the truth of the Church at the beginning of last century. But what happened after the departure of the apostles has happened again—as also with the remnant, as will be seen in the closing chapter of Ezra—that is, the word of God as the sole regulator of His house is often displaced by man for his own convenience, or for his own wisdom.

No danger is more subtle than the gradual creeping into the assembly of human thoughts and arrangements in substitution for the word of God. In effect, although not so intended, it is the deposition of the Lord from His place of supremacy over His people. There never was a time, therefore, when it was more necessary to remember the words of our

risen Lord: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

Following upon the dedication of the house, although actually a short interval elapsed, the passover was observed.

"And the children of the captivity kept the passover upon the fourteenth day of the first month. For 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, which were come again out of captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel, did eat, and kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the Lord had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel." (vv. 19-22.)

The connection is exceedingly beautiful. The house of their God finished, His people celebrate the memorial of their redemption from the land of Egypt, and thus remind themselves, to the praise of Jehovah, of the ground on which they stood, and of the fact that the foundation of all their blessing, of all God's actings in grace towards them, was the blood of the slain Lamb. This, according to the word of Moses, was "a night to be much observed unto the Lord for bringing them out from the land of Egypt: this is that night of the Lord to be observed of all the children of Israel in their generations." (Exodus xii. 42.) Nothing could show more distinctly that

these children of the captivity, were at this moment in possession of the mind of the Lord than their observance of the passover. Passing by the glories of the kingdom, they travelled upward until they reached the charter of all they possessed, whether in title or in prospect, and there confessed God as the God of their salvation. They thus built on what God was for them on the ground of the blood of the Passover Lamb, and they found in that, as individual souls ever find, a rock which is both immutable and immovable. Their hearts were in this feast; "for," as we read, "the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them were pure." (See Numbers ix. 10-14.) They discerned what was due to Him whose feast they kept.

There were others besides themselves who united with them in this observance—those who had "separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel." Whether these were of the few Israelites who had been left behind in the land, when their brethren were carried away captive, or whether they were of the heathen, is not mentioned. In Exodus xii. it is said, "There shall no stranger eat thereof;" but it is added, "When a stranger shall sojourn with thee, and will keep the passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it." (See also Numbers ix. 14.) They were probably therefore "strangers;"* and if so, they had been attracted to the children of the captivity by witnessing the divine power that was

* This conclusion may be questioned. The reader will form, after examination, his own judgment.

seen in their separation from evil. Alas! we do not read of any more being thus drawn; rather the children of Israel were drawn afterwards to the heathen. It is ever the same with the people of God. When the Spirit of God works in their midst, and when, as a consequence, they walk, in any measure, according to the nature of their calling, there will always be numbers, constrained by what they behold, seeking their company and fellowship. When, on the other hand, life and power vanish, and are succeeded by coldness and indifference, it is the world that attracts, and not the Church. Hence it is that every movement in the Church of God is most influential at the outset, because then the display of the Spirit's power is more manifest.

After the passover, they observed, according to the word of God, the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy. (See Exodus xiii.) This feast followed immediately upon the passover, and derives its special significance from it. The apostle has explained this to us. He says, "Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." (1 Cor. v. 7, 8.) That is, the moment we are redeemed God claims us, and He desires us to respond to His claims by holy lives—separation from evil, and separation unto Himself. The feast lasted seven days; *i.e.*, a perfect period—typically, the period of our lives. Thus in the Old as in the New Testament all God's claims upon His people are founded on redemption. "Ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price."

This, whatever the change of words, is the unvarying note, and teaches the uniform lesson, everywhere repeated, that since He is holy, we also are to be holy. Leaven must not be found in our dwellings, but we are to keep the feast perpetually with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. Nor should these two things be ever disjoined in teaching. If grace—grace unbounded—is displayed in our redemption, grace should be operative in the hearts of the redeemed. If God calls us out of the world, it is not that we should go back to and find our home again in the world. If by His grace we are washed in the precious blood of Christ, He surely looks that we should keep our garments undefiled. If then the memorials of our redemption are sweet to us, if we delight to be found around the Lord's table, to feast upon the emblems of His body and His blood, let us also delight to keep the feast of unleavened bread in testimony to Him who has redeemed us, and for the glory of His blessed name.

It was a time of joy to this poor remnant; for the blessing of God rested upon them, and the heart of the Gentile king was turned towards them. For a season the clouds had disappeared, and they could rest in the sunshine of heavenly and earthly favour.

Here the first part of the book closes; the remaining four chapters are occupied with the mission and work of Ezra.

CHAPTER VII.

WE now enter upon the second part of this book. In the first part, the return of the people from Babylon and the building of the temple are narrated; and in the second we have the personal mission and the work of Ezra. It should again be noticed that the signs of the transference of governmental power in the earth from the Jew to the Gentile are everywhere apparent. Thus the date of Ezra's mission is given as "in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia," and indeed his commission for his work from the king is given at length (vv. 11-26), in proof that God's people were at this time under the authority of the Gentiles, and that God Himself ever recognizes the powers which have their source in His own sovereign appointment.

It may aid the reader if the structure of chapters vii. and viii. is first briefly indicated. After Ezra's genealogy (chap. vii. 1-5) a short summary is given of the king's permission for him to go, of his journey up to Jerusalem, and of the object of his mission. (vv. 6-10.) Then follows the king's letter, conferring upon Ezra authority to act, as well as the necessary powers for the execution of his work. (vv. 11-26.) This chapter closes with Ezra's ascription of praise to God for having inclined the heart of the king to Jehovah's temple, and for having

extended mercy to himself before the king, &c. (vv. 27, 28.) In chapter viii. 1-14 we have a catalogue of those who voluntarily availed themselves of the royal permission to go up from Babylon with Ezra. All these having been assembled by "the river that runneth to Ahava," Ezra finding that none of the sons of Levi were there, took measures to secure "ministers for the house of our God." (vv. 15-20.) All being thus prepared, two things follow; first, fasting and supplication before God (vv. 21-23); and secondly, the appointment of twelve of the chief of the priests to take charge of the silver, the gold, and the vessels which had been offered for "the house of our God." (vv. 24-30.) Lastly, we have the journey, and the arrival at Jerusalem, together with the necessary preparations for the commencement of Ezra's work. (vv. 31-36.)

It will thus be seen that chapters vii. and viii. should be read together, forming as they do a continuous narrative, of which chapter vii. 1-10 is the preface or introduction.

The genealogy of Ezra is traced back to Aaron. (vv. 1-5.) He was one therefore entitled to all the rights and privileges of the priesthood (see chap. ii. 62); and, moreover, he was a ready scribe in the law of his God, and thereby qualified to be the instructor of the people in the statutes of Jehovah. (See Lev. x. 8-11; Mal. ii. 4-7.) He became a priest by birth and consecration; but he only became "a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given," by personal study of the Word. Inherited office therefore, even with the Jews, could not bestow the qualifications

for its exercise—these could only come from individual converse with God in the Scriptures; for while by virtue of consecration the priest was entitled by grace to minister before God, he could only minister acceptably when all was done in obedience to the Word, and it was impossible that he could teach unless he himself were acquainted with the mind of God. It was neglect of this second part of their office that led to the failure and corruption of the priesthood; for so completely was the word of God forgotten in the days of Josiah, that the finding of a copy of the law in the temple became an epoch in his reign.

It is therefore of surpassing interest—like finding a beautiful flower in the midst of a sandy desert—to discover in Ezra one who, while he cherished his priestly descent, found his joy and strength in the law of his God; and in verse 10 the secret of his attainments is unfolded. He had “prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it.” Let the reader ponder this significant and instructive statement—“He had prepared his heart.” So the apostle prayed for the Ephesian believers, that “the eyes of their heart” (heart is the right reading) might be enlightened, that they might know what is the hope of His calling, &c. (Chap. i. 18.) Yes, it is to the heart that the revelations of God are made, even as it was to the heart of the Magdalene that the Lord manifested Himself at the sepulchre, rather than to the intelligence of His disciples. Nor can we attach too much importance to this truth. Preparation of heart (and this also cometh from the Lord) is everything, whether for the study of the

Word, for prayer, or for worship. (See 1 Cor. viii. 1-3; Heb. x. 22; 1 John iii. 20-23.)

There is yet another thing. If Ezra prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, it was first and foremost that he might *do it*. It was not therefore to increase his knowledge, to add to his repute as a teacher; but it was that his heart, life, and ways might be formed by it—that his own walk might be the embodiment of the truth, and thus well-pleasing to the Lord. Then followed teaching, “and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.” This order can never be neglected with impunity; for where teaching does not flow out of a heart that is itself subject to the truth, it is not only powerless to influence others, but it will also harden the heart of the teacher himself. This is the secret of many a failure in the Church of God. The saints are ever and anon startled by the sudden departure from the truth, or by the fall, of those who had occupied the place of teachers; but whenever the state of the heart is overlooked, and the activity of mind is permitted upon divine things, the soul is exposed to some of Satan’s most subtle temptations. A true teacher should be able in measure, like Paul, to point to his own example, and to say, as he did to the Thessalonians, “Ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.” (See also Acts xx. and Phil. iii.)

It is evident, moreover, that Ezra was in communion with the mind of God as to His people. His heart was upon them; for we learn that he had sought permission of the king to go up to Jerusalem, and that “the king granted him all his request,

according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him." (v. 6.) What he desired, therefore, was the welfare, the blessing of his people, the people of his God, but being under subjection to the king, he had to obtain his leave; for the Lord will not have us, even for His own service, slight the authority under which we are placed. If, however, the Lord had put the desire to serve Him in the heart of Ezra, He will influence the king to answer His servant's request.

How good it is to leave ourselves in His hands! We are tempted oftentimes to overleap the barriers which man may place in our path, to force open the doors which the hand of man may have closed; but it is for our comfort and strength to remember that the Lord can make His way plain before our face whenever He wills, and that our part is to quietly wait on Him, ready to go forward when He shall speak the word. The recognition of the hand of God upon him was a characteristic of this devoted servant (see verse 9; chap. viii. 18, 22, 31, &c.), and it was at once the source both of his patience and of his courage.

The details of the journey, of which we have a short account in verses 7-9, will occupy us in the next chapter; and hence we may pass at once to the king's letter of authorization to Ezra—a letter which empowered him to act, defined the object of his mission, and provided, through the king's treasurers beyond the river, the means for the execution of his service in connection with the ordering of the house of Jehovah.

First, after the salutation—a salutation which shows

that Ezra was a true witness in the midst of the Gentiles—the king decrees that “all they of the people of Israel, and of His priests and Levites, in my realm, which are minded of their own freewill to go up to Jerusalem, go with thee.” (v. 13.) Cyrus, as seen in chap. i., had also accorded the same privilege; and now, after the lapse of many years, once again the Spirit of God works, through the king, to deliver His people. But no human constraint was to be exercised: if any man went up, it must be voluntarily; for God would have willing servants. If under constraint, it must be only that of the Holy Spirit. Then, from verses 14–20, the scope and objects of Ezra’s mission are carefully defined even as to its details. He was “sent of the king and his seven counsellors, to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of thy God which is in thine hand.” (v. 14.) He was, further, to take charge of the silver and gold which the king and his counsellors had freely offered to the God of Israel, also of that found in the province of Babylon, together with the free-will offering of the people, &c.; and this was to be expended in the purchase of animals, for sacrifice, &c., or as Ezra and his brethren might decide, “after the will of their God.”

The reader may gather the particulars of Ezra’s commission for himself. His attention, however, may be directed to one or two of its instructive features. It cannot fail to be observed that this Gentile monarch refers everything to the will of God, or, to speak more exactly, that he directs that all should be ordered in subjection to that will.

It would almost seem, Gentile though he was, that he was in full fellowship with the object of Ezra; and from the confession of Jehovah as the God of heaven (vv. 21, 23), it is not impossible that grace had visited his heart. Whether this were so or not, he carefully provides for the execution of Ezra's mission in every possible way, and at the same time entrusted Ezra with the government of his people "after the wisdom of God." Finally, penalties were attached to disobedience to the law of God and to the law of the king, rising even to death itself. The lesson lies on the surface that God is sovereign in the choice of His instruments, and that He doeth according to His will among the inhabitants of the earth as in the army of heaven, and that none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What doest thou? An illustration of this is found in our chapter in that "Artaxerxes, king of kings," and "Ezra the priest, a scribe of the law of God," are yoked together for the execution of God's thoughts for His people and for His house in Jerusalem.

Ezra himself is filled with adoration as he contemplates the wonder-working power of the hand of his God; for having recorded the letter of the king, he breaks out into an ascription of praise: "Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers, which hath put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem: and hath extended mercy unto me before the king, and his counsellors, and before all the king's mighty princes." (vv. 27, 28.)

He adds, "And I was strengthened as the hand of the Lord my God was upon me, and I gathered to-

gether out of Israel chief men to go up with me." In this he showed himself to be a true man of faith; he traced everything up to God. He lost sight of himself, and to his soul God was all and in all. It was thus not his request (v. 6) that induced the king to act, but it was God who put the thing into the king's heart; it was not Ezra's influence that commended him to the king and his princes, but it was God that extended mercy to him in their presence; it was not in his own power that he assembled the chief men to go up with him, but it was God who strengthened him with His own hand upon him.

In all this he is a striking example to every believer; and happy is he who, like Ezra, has learned to live in the presence of God, to look beyond the actions of men to the power that controls them all, and to receive all, favour or persecution, aids or hindrances, from the Lord. That soul has acquired the secret of perfect peace amid the confusion and turmoil of the world, as well as in the presence of Satan's power.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE close connection between this and the preceding chapter will be at once perceived. Chapter vii. closed with the words, "And I gathered together out of Israel chief men to go up with me;" this commences with, "These are now the chief of their fathers, and this is the genealogy of them that went up with me from Babylon, in the reign of Artaxerxes the king." This genealogy reaches to the end of verse 14, and it shows how precious to God were the very names of those who responded to His call at such a moment. The response itself is the fruit of His grace; but in the exercise of that same grace He is pleased to impute to His people that which He Himself had produced in their hearts. It was a goodly company, numbering over fifteen hundred souls, who were thus gathered to return to the land of their fathers—the land of all their traditions, as well as the land of all their hopes.

The first act of Ezra was to assemble them by the river that runneth to Ahava; and there abode we in tents three days: and I viewed the people and the priests, and found there none of the sons of Levi." (v. 15.) There were two, but only two, priests; viz., Gershom, son of Phinehas, and Daniel, son of Ithamar; but of the Levitical family, outside the priesthood, there was absolutely not one. Well

might Ezra have been concerned, for it was a sad symptom of the state into which the people had fallen. The priests alone enjoyed access to the holy place of the house of their God, and the Levites alone were the appointed ministers in all that appertained to its service; and yet when the proclamation was made that they might return and once more resume their privileges, they were untouched and indifferent. They had found a home in the very place where their fathers had hung their harps on the willows, and wept when they remembered Zion. And it is the same with God's people now. The moment they are tempted by the enemy to "mind earthly things," they become careless of their spiritual privileges, and, if not aroused from their lethargy, may even become "enemies of the cross of Christ." No child of God who understands his heavenly calling could be content to dwell in Babylon.

Nor was Ezra content to leave the Levites behind. Besides, he knew the needs of the Lord's house, and it pained this devoted servant to find them caring for their own things rather than for the courts of Jehovah. He accordingly took measures to reach their consciences, that they might even yet join him in his mission to Jerusalem. To this end he sent for some of their chief men, among whom were Joiarib and Elnathan, "men of understanding." It is well for the people of God when, in times of decay and corruption, there are still men of understanding to be found. It is by these that God preserves His saints from sinking into still deeper depths, and keeps alive what of faith and hope may still remain. Ezra knew where to put his hand on some of these;

and his zeal for the work on which his heart was set is expressed in the commission with which he entrusted them.

He says, "And I sent them with commandment unto Iddo the chief at the place Casiphia, and I told them what they should say unto Iddo, and to his brethren the Nethinims, at the place Casiphia, that they should bring unto us ministers for the house of our God." (v. 17.) It is said of the Lord Jesus, or rather, speaking in spirit, He Himself said, "The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up" (Psalm lxi. 9; John ii. 17); and this was because the glory of the Father was ever His supreme object. God's name, God's honour, were ever the delight of His soul. And Ezra also, in his measure, desired Jehovah's honour in His house, and was therefore in fellowship with the heart of God Himself. This was the secret of his earnestness in seeking to obtain "ministers for the house of our God."

And God wrought with him, as he himself confesses; for he says, "By the good hand of our God upon us, they brought us a man of understanding, of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel; and Sherebiah, with his sons and his brethren, eighteen; and Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiiah, of the sons of Merari, his brethren and their sons, twenty; also of the Nethinims, whom David and the princes had appointed for the service of the Levites, two hundred and twenty Nethinims: all of them were expressed by name." (vv. 18-20.) There were still less than forty Levites, while there were two hundred and twenty Nethinims.* It is another

* For an explanation of these, see on chap. ii.

proof that, amid the carnal ease of Babylon, the national hopes and privileges of the nation had ceased to exert any practical power upon their minds. By the side of the sloth of the Levites, it is beautiful to notice the number of the Nethinims (probably of an alien race) that obeyed the summons of Ezra.

It may be in reference to this that it is said, "all of them were expressed by name." God notices their faithfulness, and caused it to be recorded.

All was now ready, as far as collecting the people was concerned; but both Ezra as well as the people needed preparation for the journey which they had undertaken. Hence he says, "Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of Him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance. For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help 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 power and His wrath is against all them that forsake Him. So we fasted and besought our God for this; and He was entreated of us." (vv. 21-23.)

The work of God is never lightly to be entered upon; and it was with a true discernment both of the character of the work, and of what was due to His glory who had called him to it, that Ezra proclaimed this fast, that he and the people might afflict themselves before their God. The flesh cannot be used, in any shape and form, in the Lord's service; and it is only when in true separation from

all that it might feed upon, and in humiliation in the presence of God, that our motives, aims, and objects are tested and become apparent. Thus amongst those that had gathered around Ezra, some might have been attracted by other things than the welfare of the house of their God. This is always the case in any action of the Holy Spirit. Ezra, therefore, would have all searched by the light of God's holy presence, that they might learn that nothing would avail to protect and guide them in their journey, and nothing could sustain them by the way or in their after service, but the good hand of their God. Thus it was that he and they together fasted, afflicted their souls, and prayed.

And the question may well arise whether in this day our service for God is not often too easily taken up; whether it would not conduce to spiritual power and efficacy if, before we embarked upon anything for God, we were more frequently found in this attitude of Ezra and his companions. Far be it from us to insinuate for one moment that the Lord's servants do not thus seek His face before commencing their service. Our question concerns rather collective waiting upon God, with fasting, before work is entered upon in which the saints at large have a common interest. It was understood in the early Church; for we read, "There were in the Church that was at Antioch prophets. . . . As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me now * Barnabas and Saul for the work.

* This word "now," or some such, should be inserted as a translation of the Greek particle $\delta\acute{\eta}$, and as showing the connection between the ministering and fasting, and the command of the Holy Spirit; in fact, the Holy Spirit responded to the prayers of these prophets.

whereunto I have called them." (Acts xiii. 1, 2.) If there were but a revival of such a practice in the power of the Holy Ghost (for to imitate it without the power would be worse than useless), far larger results from service in teaching and ministry might be confidently anticipated.

Another reason for this gathering actuated Ezra. He was a man of faith, and he had avowed before the king his confidence in God for protection during his journey, and he would not therefore ask for a military escort. And now, in consistency with his profession, he, together with the people, cast himself on God for guidance, for a "right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance." As every believer knows, it is one thing to express trust in God before a difficulty comes, and another thing to maintain that dependence in the presence of, and when passing through, the difficulty. Ezra was able to do both, and was able to rest in the assurance that the hand of his God would be upon all them that seek Him for good, and that His power and His wrath would be against all them that forsake Him. All this he doubtless told out before the Lord during this fast, and indeed he had pledged the faithfulness of God before a Gentile monarch, so that the name and honour of Jehovah were concerned in appearing for His servant. Ezra tells us, "So we fasted and besought our God for this; and He was entreated of us." Yea, God delights to respond to the confidence of His people, and to appear for those who testify to what He is for them amid trials and dangers.

The reader should remark, that it was no imagin-

ary danger which Ezra had conjured up; for he records afterward to the praise of his God that "He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way." (v. 31.) Surely God is the refuge and strength of His people, and a very present help for them in trouble, and they would know it more fully, if, like Ezra, they did but learn to count upon Him as all-sufficient in all possible circumstances. When Nehemiah made the same journey some years after, he was accompanied by captains of the army and horsemen. (Neh. ii. 9.) In him faith was not in such lively exercise, though he had a true heart for the Lord's interests. How much better to trust in the Lord than in a visible arm! and they that wait on Him will, like Ezra, never be ashamed.

In the next place Ezra "separated twelve of the chief of the priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their brethren," to take charge of the offerings he had received for the house of their God until they should arrive at Jerusalem. (vv. 24-30.) The ground of the choice was, that they were "holy unto the Lord," as also were the vessels. (v. 28.) As the prophet said, "Ye must be clean that bear the vessels of the Lord." And this we know was according to the divine order; for none but the priests and Levites could touch or carry the holy vessels or furniture of the house of God. (See Num. iv.)

Out of a blind misconception of this, and of the nature of Christianity, has grown the ecclesiastical custom of setting apart an order of men, the clergy, for ministration in the Church. It is quite true that

those who minister in any way from the Lord to His people must needs be set apart for their service; but this must be accomplished, not by the hands of men, but by the sovereign action in grace of God through the power of the Holy Ghost. Under law there was a distinct class of men—the priests and the Levites—but these were divinely appointed and divinely consecrated; but under grace, while there are still distinctions of gifts and services (1 Cor. xii.), all believers alike are priests, and as such have an indefeasible title to appear in the holiest in the immediate presence of God.

It was then to the custody of the priests that Ezra committed the holy vessels, and the silver and the gold, which had been given as a free-will offering unto the Lord God of their fathers. And he enjoined them to watch and keep these things “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.” (v. 29.) The expression “weigh them” contains a principle of importance. It was not that Ezra doubted the fidelity of the priests he had selected; but even as the apostle of a later age, he would “provide for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.” (2 Cor. viii. 21.) The people might have had full confidence in the integrity both of Ezra and of the priests; but Ezra would remove all occasion for the enemy’s work by having the vessels, and the silver and the gold, weighed when put into the priest’s hands, and again weighed when delivered. He thus proved his and their fidelity. And surely this is a

godly, a scriptural example to be followed by those who in any way have charge of the offerings of the Lord's people. Such should be careful to render an account of their stewardship, and not wait to be pressed to give it.

Many a difficulty in the Church of God might have been obviated if this practice had been adopted. It may further be noted that on reaching Jerusalem the weighing was done by others than Ezra, "and all the weight was written at that time." (*vv.* 33, 34.) In modern language, the accounts of Ezra were checked and audited, and this was done on the fourth day after the completion of their journey.

In verse 31 we have a short statement (already alluded to) concerning their journey. It simply records the faithfulness of their God in answer to their prayers. "Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem: and the hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way. And we came to Jerusalem." In chap. vii. 9, it is said that they began to go up upon the first day of the first month, this being the probable date of gathering the people to the river Ahava. (*Chap.* viii. 15.) The actual journey occupied therefore a little less than four months; and Ezra testifies that God safely guided them through all its perils and dangers, and shielded them from all their foes. Truly "the name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe."

Nor were they unmindful of the Lord after the difficulties of their journey were over; for "the

children of those that had been carried away, which were come out of the captivity, offered burnt-offerings unto the God of Israel, twelve bullocks for all Israel, ninety and six rams, seventy and seven lambs, twelve he goats for a sin-offering; all this was a burnt-offering unto the Lord."

It is touching in the extreme to see this feeble remnant, as also was the case at the dedication of the house of God (chap. vi. 17), embrace in their faith the whole of Israel. They were but few in number, but they could accept no narrower ground than that of the twelve tribes, and to this they testified by the number of their offerings. It is the same now, or should be so, with those who are gathered out to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ on the ground of the one body. They also may be few, feeble, and poor; but if they have any intelligence of the wealthy place into which they have been brought, they will refuse any narrower ground than that of all the members of the one body; and if they hold this truth in power, their sacrifices of praise will bear witness to it in the presence of all. Failing to do so, they degenerate, whatever their profession, into the narrowest sectarianism, than which nothing is more abhorrent to the mind of the Lord.

Others may taunt them with their poverty and broken condition; but if they do but, "with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love," endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, maintaining before God the sense of oneness with all the saints, the Lord will abundantly sustain them with His approbation and blessing.

It will be noticed that there were two kinds of sacrifices—burnt-offerings and sin-offerings. From the numbers, it would seem that the twelve he goats, as well as the twelve bullocks, were for all Israel, and that the other offerings were individual, the spontaneous expression of grateful hearts for the mercy of Jehovah towards them, in bringing them in safety to Jerusalem and to His house.

Having thus put themselves under the efficacy of the sacrifices, and having established their relationships with God on the only possible ground, they proceeded to deliver “the king’s commissions unto the king’s lieutenants, and to the governors on this side the river: and they furthered the people, and the house of God.” (v. 36.) This order is as instructive as beautiful. They first placed themselves under the favour of God, through their offerings, and then they turned to the king’s officers. They gave their God their first thoughts and the first place, and they owned thereby that all depended on Him. He answered to His people’s confidence by touching the hearts of the lieutenants and governors, and inclining them to favour His people and the object they had in view.

How blessed it is to be wholly dependent on God, and to look to Him alone to further His cause!

CHAPTER IX.

WHOWER seeks the welfare of God's people must expect a path of trial and sorrow; for, with the affections of God Himself actuating him, the servant will, in his measure, identify himself with their state and condition while labouring for the glory of God in their midst. This was perfectly exemplified in the life of Him who was able to say, "The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up;" and also, in no mean degree, in His servant Paul, who says, in the power of the Holy Ghost, "I endure all things for the elect's sake, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory." (2 Tim. ii. 10.)

It was the experience also of Ezra in the opening of this chapter. Filled with a holy zeal, he had been moved to come up to Jerusalem, that he might "teach in Israel statutes and judgments;" and he finds at the very outset that many of the chosen people had already sunk nearly as low as, if not lower than, the Canaanites, whom God had cast out before them. He says:

"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 people 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 people of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass." (vv. 1, 2.)

Such is man! Nay, such are the people of God when following the inclination of their own hearts, instead of walking in obedience to His word! Remark, moreover, that when the saints fall into sin, it is often into worse and grosser forms of sin than those committed by the people of the world. It is as if Satan, having gained the advantage over them, would mock at and triumph over them by displaying the most horrible forms of the flesh. In the case before us, it was not only the abominations of the Canaanites, &c. (the former inhabitants of the land), but also those of the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites, into which the children of the captivity had fallen; *i.e.*, into every possible form of corruption.

And all this had taken place in so short a time—within a few years of the completion of the temple. Objects of the special grace of God in their deliverance from their Babylonish captivity, they had turned His grace into lasciviousness.

What forbearance and long-suffering on the part of Him who had restored them once again to the land of their fathers, in that He did not instantly deal with them in judgment! But if His people are ever the same in their backsliding and sins, He is also unchangeable in His mercy and grace. Hence the

gifts and calling of God are without repentance; and therein, and therein alone, lies the security of His people.

The special sin here mentioned is, that "the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands;" *i.e.*, by inter-marriages. This had been expressly forbidden.* (See Exodus xxxiv. 12-16.) It was therefore in wilful disobedience that they had contracted these shameful alliances with the world; for this is what these marriages typify—the besetting sin of God's people in every age. The apostle James thus says, "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be" (is minded to be) "a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (chap. iv. 4); and the apostle Paul cries, "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?" &c. (2 Cor. vi. 14, 15.) For if Jehovah deigned to say that He was married to Israel (Isaiah liv.; Jeremiah ii.), believers now are said to be married to Christ. (Romans vii.; 2 Cor. xi.) Whether for the Jew therefore or for the Christian to unite himself with the world is both unfaithfulness and sin, as well as to forget the holy place of separation into which the former had been, and the Christian is called.

* That it was not inter-marriages only may be gathered from the passage above cited from Exodus, as also from Numbers xxv.; in fact, all the abominations of the idolatry of the several nations named were connected with these marriages.

Nor was this sin confined to any one class of the people. "The hand of the princes and rulers had been chief in this trespass," and the priests and the Levites, as well as the people, are distinctly named. It would seem then that the princes and rulers had first set the example, and that the others had only been too ready to follow. "One sinner destroyeth much good," especially when that one has a place of position and influence. As when a standard-bearer fainteth in the day of battle, the soldiers are often discouraged and so easily defeated, so after Satan has succeeded in entrapping a leader in the Church of God, he often finds it easy work to ensnare many who are less conspicuous. On this account the sin of a ruler or priest under the law needed a larger sacrifice than that of one of the common people. It is therefore a solemn thing—solemn for himself and for the consequences entailed—when a "prince" or "ruler" becomes the leader of God's people into the path of worldliness and idolatry.

Such were the heavy tidings brought to the ears of Ezra soon after his arrival in Jerusalem; and in the next verse we have the effect produced upon this pious and devoted soul. He says, "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." (v. 3.) He was thus smitten with a great and unspeakable grief because of the sins of his people, and the secret of the intensity of his sorrow, expressed in all these outward signs of humiliation before God, was that he felt in his inmost soul the dishonour done to Jehovah's holy name.

It is comparatively easy to feel for God's people when *they* are dishonoured by their sinful conduct in the eyes of the world; but it is only those who are, through the power of the Holy Ghost, in communion with the mind of God, those who share in His affections for His own, those therefore who first and foremost are filled with zeal for the maintenance of His glory, that can estimate their sin as it affects the holy Name by which they are called, can go down, take up, make the sin their own, and tell it all out before God. Moses, Nehemiah, and Daniel are examples of this in their several measures, as well as Ezra; but all these, with others that might be named, are but feeble foreshadowings of Him who so identified Himself with His people that in confessing their sins He said, "O God, thou knowest *my* foolishness; and *my* sins are not hid from thee." (Ps. lxix. 5.)

The grief and humiliation of Ezra were used to reach the consciences of others, or rather to attract to him all who in any degree had mourned over the condition of the people; for he tells us, "Then were assembled unto me every one that trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those that had been carried away." (v. 4.) "To this man," says the Lord, "will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word;" for trembling at God's word is the evidence of a tender conscience, of one walking in the fear of God, and desiring to be found in His ways. Blessed was it therefore that there were still such among the children of the captivity, though it would seem their trembling sprang rather

from an apprehension of the consequences of the transgression of their fellows, than from a gracious fear of offending their God.

However this might have been, where had they been, and where their testimony before the arrival of Ezra? But that their hearts were true is shown by their taking their stand at this critical moment with him; and we learn at the same time that we have no power to help our brethren until we distinctly and openly take our stand against the evil by which they have been ensnared. Faithfulness to God is the first qualification for helping others.

Ezra retained his place in the dust—borne down by his inexpressible sorrow—*until the evening sacrifice*. If on the one hand he was heart-broken on account of the people's sin, on the other he discerned, in the exercise of faith, the only ground of approach to God concerning it. In a word, he laid hold of the efficacy of the sacrifice as the foundation on which he could appear before God to spread out before Him the iniquities of the children of Israel. (Compare 1 Sam. vii. 9; 1 Kings xviii. 36, &c.) The evening sacrifice was a burnt-offering, all of which, consumed on the altar, went up as a sweet savour unto the Lord; and when once Ezra was before Him in the value of this—in all the value typically of what Christ was to God in His death—the success of his intercession was assured. The Lord Himself could on this account say, "Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son." (John xiv. 13.) It was then, as understanding the value of the sacrifice, that Ezra rose up from his heaviness, and

having rent his garment and mantle, he fell upon his knees, and spread out his hands unto the Lord his God, and confessed the sins of his people. Let us examine a little these outpourings of his burdened heart.

Remark, first, how completely he takes the place of the people before God. He says, "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." (v. 6.) Not even in spirit does he separate himself from those who had sinned; he and they—indeed, all the people—are one, corporately one before God. It was so in the eyes of God Himself; for when Achan transgressed, He said to Joshua, "Israel hath sinned." Ezra understood this, and was thus qualified to become an intercessor for the people with God; for unless we apprehend our oneness with God's people, that their sin and sorrow are our sin and sorrow, we cannot truly bear them on our hearts before the Lord in the time of their need.

Having thus taken their place, Ezra confessed that nothing but sin had marked them from the days of their fathers, and that all God's judicial dealings with them, in delivering them "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," had been on account of their iniquities. He justified God in all His past dealings with His people. And then he owned the grace that had been shown to them from the Lord their God in bringing back a remnant, "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," he adds, "we *are* [not *were*, as in our version] 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 in Jerusalem." (vv. 8, 9.)

The order of Ezra's confessions is most instructive. Having owned the sins of his brethren, and justified God in His ways with His people, he in the next place magnifies the grace which had visited them in their low estate, and had brought them—a remnant—back to the land, and permitted them once again to set up the house of their God. But why does he recite this proof of Jehovah's grace and mercy? It was to show the character of His people's sin; for he proceeds, "And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? for we have forsaken thy commandments;" and then he confesses that they had sinned against both light and grace. He conceals nothing, and extenuates nothing, but spreads all out before God, whilst he owns that if, after all the mercy they had received (v. 13), they should again break God's commandments, and "join in affinity with the people of these abominations," God might well be angry with them till He had consumed them, "so that there should be no remnant nor escaping." (v. 14.) He then concludes by once more justifying God, and by taking His part against himself and the people. He says, "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." (v. 15.)

There is much in this inspired confession to commend to the attention of the Lord's people. Its main features have already been indicated; but we desire to emphasize the fact that Ezra from first to last justifies God, and lays bare the iniquities of his people. This in itself is not only a proof of the work of the Holy Spirit, but also a promise of blessing. The place of confession is always the place both of restoration and of spiritual power; and hence it is always a sign of a bad condition when that place is rarely taken. Let us then for a moment challenge ourselves. We have more than once pointed out the correspondence between this remnant and that gathered out to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ in the present day. Is there no correspondence between the sins of the two? Is it not the fact that we have largely "joined in affinity" with the people of the world? Have we not submitted ourselves to their habits, ways, and customs? Is not worldliness our bane? Are not traces of Egypt to be seen everywhere in the assembly? Do we not think more of riches and social position than of the fruits of the Spirit?

Moreover, is it not seldom that our sins (we do not mean our individual sins, but the sins of God's people) are really confessed in our meetings? Nay, is there not an unwillingness on our parts to hear our sins spread out before the Lord? If, for example, our departures from the word of God are owned, our setting aside the authority of Christ, our coldness, our unfaithfulness to the Lord and His truth, our

want of separation—if these things are told out in our meetings for prayer, is there not often a manifest impatience, a feeling like that expressed in Malachi, “Wherein have we done this or that?” But we cannot too soon learn the lesson that the Lord will have reality; that, if we are blind to it, He sees our condition, and that until we are brought to own it, like Ezra in this scripture, He must from His very love to us deal with us in corrections and chastisements.

It should also be observed that Ezra does not once pray for forgiveness. Nay, with any intelligence of the mind of God, it was impossible that he should do so. When there is known evil in our hearts or in the assembly, our first responsibility is to judge it, not to pray for forgiveness. Thus, when Joshua lay on his face before the Lord, after the defeat of Israel by the men of Ai, the Lord said, “Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face? Israel hath sinned,” &c.

And yet how often does Satan beguile the Lord's people, in a time of manifested evil, by suggesting through one or another, Let us pray about it. Confess our sins we surely should, but even then only as seeking grace and strength to deal with the evil, and to separate ourselves from it; for if Ezra lay before the Lord in this chapter owning his people's guilt, we shall see him in the next energetic in dealing with the sin he had confessed, and resting not until it had been put away.

CHAPTER X.

THE Lord used the sorrow of His servant to reach the consciences of His people, who had been guilty of transgressing His commandments; for, in truth, the sorrow of Ezra was no common sorrow. Every indication is given of the intensity of his grief. When he "had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God." By his prayer, his confessions, his tears, and his prostration before God, he had told out his grief for the sins of Israel; and he had done so publicly "before the house of God." It became known therefore to those for whom he had been pleading; and "there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore." (v. 1.)

It would seem that the tears of the people proceeded either from contrition, or from fear of the consequences of their misdeeds. Ezra was armed with authority (see chap. vii. 25, 26), and his zeal for his God was manifested; and they therefore knew that he would proceed to separate them from the evil for which he had humbled himself before God. This would entail upon many of them the most bitter consequences. Though they had acted in self-will, in disobedience, their hearts might have been truly upon the wives they had married, and upon their children.

To separate from them might thus involve the rending of the most affectionate ties, a prospect which might well cause them to weep. That this is the explanation of their tears seems plain, from the fact that women and children were found with the congregation that had gathered about Ezra. Alas! how hard it is to retrace the steps of unfaithfulness and sin! And how often the bitter fruits of it remain for the rest of our lives!

There were some, however, who saw the necessity of proceeding at once to act in the matter, at whatever cost, knowing, as they must have done, that Jehovah could not bless them, or prosper them in the land, as long as they were living in open violation of His commandments. "Shechaniah the son of Jehiel," we read, "one of the sons of Elam, answered and said unto Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land: yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing. Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. Arise; for this matter belongeth unto thee: we also will be with thee: be of good courage, and do it." (v. 2-4.)

Several points in this address of Shechaniah may with profit be noticed. First, it is worthy of attention, as noticed in the last chapter, how the Lord uses the faithful zeal of one to arouse others to the sense of their condition. Before the advent of Ezra, the consciences of all seem to have been deadened.

Not even Jeshua or Zerubbabel appear to have been troubled because of the prevailing sin. Ezra was alone, and alone he would be, if necessary, in taking the part of God against the transgression of the people. But it needed courage and a single eye, and both these things Ezra, by grace, possessed. And he had God with him in the part he was taking; and now we see the effect. Shechaniah comes forward on behalf of the people, owns their sin, and accepts the necessity of subjection to the Word; and besides him there were those who trembled at the commandment of God (those alluded to in chap. ix. 4), who had been drawn to the side of Ezra. In times of evil, the only path of blessing—and even of success, in its divine sense—is the path of fidelity.

Secondly, it may be observed, that both wives and those born of them were to be put away. The wives, not being of Israel, were unclean, and the children, the fruit of the mixed marriages, were also regarded as unclean. This was under law; but now under grace all this is reversed. Not that a Christian is at liberty to intermarry with the unconverted; but, as the apostle teaches, “the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy.” (1 Cor. vii. 14.) That is, if either husbands or wives, converted after their marriage, find themselves linked up with the unconverted, the above instruction applies to their case.

Under law, as in the scripture before us, the heathen wife and her children were to be sent away; but under grace the unbelieving wife is sanctified

by her husband, and the children are holy. It will be readily understood that the sanctification referred to is of an external character, as well as the holiness of the children. The wives and children were dismissed under the law because they were unclean, and as such could not be admitted into the congregation of Israel; but under grace the unconverted wife is sanctified through the husband, and is thus considered as set apart for God with His people on the earth. So also the children,* they are holy; *i.e.*, separated off from the world through the death and resurrection of Christ, and reckoned therefore *on earth* as belonging to His people. If this holiness is purely external, and carries no saving power with it, as it surely does not—for salvation is ever connected with the personal exercise of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ—it yet bestows the inestimable privilege of being in the place of blessing, the sphere where the Holy Spirit dwells and acts.

Grace could not be confined within the narrow limits of the law, even as our Lord taught when He said, "No man putteth new wine into old bottles; else the new wine will burst the bottles, and be spilled, and the bottles shall perish." (Luke v. 37.) And how precious to us to learn that the heart of God is interested in all who are linked up by natural ties with His people on the earth!

It may also be pointed out that Shechaniah owns the authority of the Word. "Let it be done," he says, "according to the law." The restoration of

* There is a difference between the sanctified wife or husband and the holiness of the children. That of the former is relative, while that of the latter is absolute.

the authority of the law over the ways, if not over the hearts and consciences, of the people was the object of Ezra's mission (chap. vii. 10), and God had now provided him with a helper in Shechaniah. There is, in truth, no other way of reformation amongst God's people.

In the course of time, as may be seen in every dispensation, customs, human maxims, traditions, &c., are adopted to the neglect of the written Word (see Matt. xv. ; 1 Tim. iv. &c.), all of which are the fruitful cause of corruption, both in heart and life as well as in the government of God's house. The only remedy therefore in times of departure is the rigid application of that Word which is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and the refusal of all which it condemns. Thereby also the people themselves are brought into the presence of God and His claims, and are encouraged to hear what "the Spirit saith unto the churches."

Individual consciences are aroused and enlightened, and, acted upon by the Spirit of God, all who tremble at the word of the Lord (chap. ix. 4) are drawn together in the common desire that the Lord's name may be vindicated and His supremacy be restored. Shechaniah's counsel was thus of God, and sprang from a true perception of the cause of Israel's sins, and what was due to Him whose name had been profaned by the transgressions of His people.

Finally, he urges Ezra forward. "Arise," he said; "for this matter belongeth unto thee: we also will be with thee: be of good courage, and do it." How grateful these words must have been to the burdened heart of Ezra! And doubtless he would

see in them the interposition of God in answer to his prayers. He had indeed learned the source of all wisdom and strength; and thus he turned to the Lord before he sought to rectify the abuses which were prevalent in the midst of Israel. Hence the Lord went before him, prepared the way and inclined the people to confess and put away their sin.

It is an immense thing to learn, as Ezra had done, that nothing can be accomplished for God by human energy, that it is only as He gives wisdom and strength, discernment and opportunity, that anything can be accomplished.

Ezra redeemed the opportunity which the Lord had thus made for him, and he "made the chief priests, the Levites, and all Israel, to swear that they should do according to this word. And they sware." (v. 5.) He thus bound them by a solemn oath to do what they had promised. One cannot but be struck with the spiritual power thus exhibited by one man. The secret of it was, that he was in communion with the mind of God, was standing in faithfulness for God in the midst of common unfaithfulness; and thus God was, and wrought, with His servant. To the outward eye, Ezra was almost alone; but the truth is, it was God and Ezra; and thus it came to pass that the hearts of the people were bowed before him. What a difference it makes when God is brought in! Many a servant might well be daunted when he views the opposition and difficulties by which he is confronted; but the moment he raises his eyes to the Lord, he measures everything by what He is, and immediately the obstacles he deplored become to his faith but occasions for

the display of His power in whom he was trusting. Our only concern therefore should be—to see that, like Jonathan, we are working with God.

The work, however, was not yet done, and the sorrow of Ezra continued as long as the sin remained; for he felt in his inmost soul the dishonour done to the name of his God. He then, we read, “rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib: and when he came thither, he did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away.” (v. 6.) Ezra felt the sin of his people according to God, and it was in this way God qualified him to separate His people from their sin. When the Lord came down from the mount, and cast out the demon from the afflicted lad, His disciples asked, “Why could not we cast him out?” The answer was, “Because of your unbelief;” and then, after declaring the efficacy of faith to remove mountains, He added, “Howbeit, this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.” And surely we may say that an unclean spirit had entered into Israel at this time, and it was precisely because Ezra had been before God with prayer and fasting that he could be used to cast him out. Yea, is it not the secret of all spiritual power—to be thus alone with God? There is indeed no power without it, and hence the want of it betrays the fact that we have been so little like Ezra in this scripture.

Proclamation was thereon made “throughout Judah and Jerusalem” that all the children of the captivity should come within three days to Jerusalem,

under the penalty for disobedience of the forfeiture of their substance and excision from the congregation. (vv. 7, 8.) All came, "all the men of Judah and Benjamin," in the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month. It must have been a striking scene, one easily recalled, as here described—"And all the people sat in the street of the house of God, trembling because of this matter, and for the great rain." Their bodily discomfort did but add to the sorrow within.

Ezra rose and addressed them. First, he charged them with their sin (v. 10), and then urged them to confess "unto the Lord God of your fathers, and do His pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives." (v. 11.) His first thought therefore was concerning what was due to Jehovah; but if they confessed to Him they must submit themselves to His will.

Too often the soul deceives itself even by confession—confession without judging the sin. Ezra was too well instructed in the word and in the ways of God to permit this; and hence there must be self-judgment and separation from the evil as well as its confession. The order of the separation too is most instructive—"From the people of the land, and from the strange wives." As marrying the strange wives had been the sin, it might be thought that these would be mentioned first. But what had led to these marriages? *Association with the people of the land.* This was the root of the mischief, and Ezra thus deals first with it. So in all departures from God, until the root is discovered nothing is gained, and restoration is impossible.

The Lord Himself has given a perfect illustration of this in His dealing with Peter. Not until He had asked him three times, "Lovest thou me?" (once, "Lovest thou me more than these?" for confidence in his own love to Christ—a love, as he affirmed, greater than that of the rest—was the cause of his fall) did He effect his restoration. It was on this same principle that Ezra acted when he demanded separation, first of all, from the people of the land.

The power of God was still manifestly with His servant. The people assented to his demands, for they had been made to feel that "the fierce wrath of their God" was upon them because of their sins. They answered, "As thou hast said, so must we do." They only pleaded that the work could not be carried out there and then; for they said, "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 which 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." (vv. 12-14.)

The plea and counsel of the people were accepted, and we have in the next place the names of those who were employed about the matter.* (v. 15.) Further we are told that "Ezra the priest, with certain chief of the fathers, after the house of their

* It is not clear whether those named in verse 15 were not rather opposing the suggestion of the people. One translation gives, "Stood up against this matter." Certainly Ezra and the chief of the fathers did the work. (v. 16.)

fathers, and all of them by their names, were separated [*i.e.*, set apart for this work], and sat down in the first day of the tenth month to examine the matter. And they made an end with all the men that had taken strange wives by the first day of the first month." Thus in two months the work was completed. Thereafter is given a list of the names of those who had transgressed, concerning which there are two or three remarks to be made.

First, the names of the priests who had fallen into sin are recorded, and these are divided into two classes. In verse 18 there are "the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren;" and in verses 20-22 other priests. (See chap. ii. 37-40.) The former were held, it would seem, to be the more culpable, and with reason; for Jeshua had been associated, in the grace of God, with Zerubbabel, as the leaders of His people in building His house. It shows how that all conscience had been lost as to the character of their sin. "The priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they [the people] should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts;" but in this case the priests had corrupted the people by their evil ways. But now being dealt with "they gave their hands that they would put away their wives; and being guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their trespass." This, it will be observed, is only said of the kindred of Jeshua. The names of the rest, priests, Levites, singers, porters, and Israel are singly given.

This leads to our second observation—that nothing escapes the eye of God. By Him all our actions are weighed and recorded, one day to be produced either

to magnify His grace, or (if we include unbelievers) as the ground of righteous judgment. "We must all," says the apostle, "appear before the judgment-seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad." (2 Cor. v. 10.)

Finally, it may be pointed out that while Ezra, as may be seen from Nehemiah (chap. viii. 1), continued to labour in the midst of his people, he no longer appears as the prominent figure—as the leader. Together with this chapter his special work was done, and he discerns it. For this great grace is needed. The temptation, when the Lord uses one of His servants for some particular and public service, is to think that he must continue in a foremost place. If he yield to the temptation, it brings sorrow to himself, and failure for the people. The Lord who uses one to-day, may send another to-morrow; and blessed is that servant who can recognize, as Ezra did, when his special mission is ended, and who is willing, like John the Baptist, to be anything or nothing if so be his Lord may be exalted.

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