

Notes on the Books of

**EZRA**

**NEHEMIAH**

and **ESTHER**

by

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## Prefatory Note

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

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

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

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

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

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

H. A. IRONSIDE.

*Casa Blanca, New Mexico.*

# NOTES

ON

## THE BOOK OF EZRA

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### CHAPTER I

#### Separated Vessels

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

## CHAPTER II.

## Back to the Place of the Name

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

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

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

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

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

In verse 2 we read both of a Nehemiah and a Mordecai: but the first must not be confounded with the writer of the next book, who came up later, after the re-building of the temple, and in accordance with the “commandment to restore and build Jerusalem,” mentioned as the starting point of the seventy heptads of Dan. 9: 24. Nor should the record be identified with the aged

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

## CHAPTER III

## The Altar and the House

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

For we are not called to rebuild the Church.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CHAPTER IV

## The Adversaries

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The cunningly worded document accomplished its purpose, and a messenger soon returned with an imperial mandate declaring that search had been made, and all the evil accusations against Jerusalem as a centre of rebellion and sedition established. Then an order is given to "cause these men to cease, and that this city be not builded until another commandment shall be given from me" (vers. 17-21).

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

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

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

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

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

## CHAPTER V

## Prophetic Ministry

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Darius here mentioned should not be con-



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

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

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

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

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

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\* Their addition of the words "and earth" shows their ignorance of God's relation with Israel at that time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CHAPTER VI

## The House Completed

**T**HAT God never fails an obedient and trusting people is preciousy exemplified in this stirring chapter of His ways with the separated remnant of the Jews.

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

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

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

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

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

The last part of his letter is such as we might expect from a king of his character, under the circumstances that had arisen: "And the God that hath caused His name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem" (ver. 12). It is a solemn fact that this curse was literally fulfilled in every instance. Antiochus defiled this house and died unnaturally under the anger of God. Herod presumed to alter and enlarge it for his own aggrandizement, and died under divine displeasure. The Romans utterly destroyed it when the days of grace for Israel had expired; but in doing so, sealed their own doom, and their mighty empire is to-day but a memory.

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CHAPTER VII

## A Second Awakening

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

of wine, and to a hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much " (vers. 21, 22).

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CHAPTER VIII

## The March of Faith

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ezra at once sent a deputation of faithful men to lay before the Levites and the Nethinims, who were of old appointed by David to the service of the Levites, to lay before them the importance of going forth with them, "That they should bring unto us ministers for the house of our God" (vers. 15-17). And thus it was that a number of both classes were, as Ezra so beautifully puts it, "by the good hand of our God upon us," led to join their company. Among these one is especially mentioned as "a man of understanding." Valuable indeed in any movement of God's Spirit are such men; like those of old, who "had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

## CHAPTER IX

## The Break-down by Amalgamation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The first burst of praise and worship over, for

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CHAPTER X

## Humiliation and Lifting Up

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

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

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

Refusing all physical refreshment because of



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



NOTES  
ON THE  
BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

PREFACE  
TO THE SECOND EDITION

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IN going over these pages again after the lapse of nearly twelve years I feel more than ever the importance of the truths on which they insist. The need for holy separation from the world and worldly Christianity is more evident with each passing day, as the dispensation nears its close. On the other hand the need of increasing largeness of heart toward God's beloved people struggling against the evil and crying for light and for help becomes more manifest. To all such I send forth this little book again on its mission of love.

H. A. IRONSIDE.

*June, 1925.*

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## PREFATORY NOTE

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THE little book now before the reader has been in contemplation ever since its companion-exposition, "Notes on the Book of Ezra," was published. If read in connection with that work and also the writer's "Notes on Esther" (the three issued separately, also in one volume), and the "Notes on Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi" in the volume on "The Minor Prophets," a connection will be traced throughout.

As heretofore, no attempt has been made to write for scholars or to produce a literary work. But in the simplest way I have sought to emphasize important truths that are being neglected in many places where they need to be pressed more insistently than ever.

The Lord watch over all for His name's sake.

H. A. IRONSIDE.

*Nov.*, 1913.

NOTES  
ON THE  
BOOK of NEHEMIAH

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INTRODUCTION

**I**N the book of Ezra, we see a remnant people gathered back to the place where the Lord had set His name, after a long period of bondage and exile in Babylon, the centre of the false religious system of that day. Nehemiah pursues the further history of this company for some years afterwards, but is especially devoted to the work of guarding the place of privilege, as indicated in the large space given to the narration of events in connection with the building of the wall of Jerusalem. This was a wall both of protection and exclusion, and doubtless speaks to us to-day of principles which may easily be abused where self-judgment and spirituality are lacking, but which are nevertheless of supreme importance if any scriptural testimony is to be

maintained in a day of declension. It is considered a mark of liberality and brotherly kindness with many, to declaim against all exclusiveness on the part of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. But it is to be feared numbers object to a term they neither understand nor see the reason for.

A word in the book of Deuteronomy might help as to this. In chapter 22:8 we read: "When thou buildest a new house, then thou shalt make a battlement for thy roof, that thou bring not blood upon thy house if any man fall from thence." The battlement surrounding the flat roof of the Israelite's dwelling conveys much the same thought as the wall enclosing Jerusalem. The roof was to the oriental the place of communion and retirement (1 Sam. 9: 25; Prov. 21: 9), of prayer (Acts 10: 9), and of testimony (Matt. 10: 27). It was commonly used very much as both the parlor and the study of the occidental. There the family would commune together, and there they would entertain friends. But if there were no protecting wall about this favored place, it would be one of danger to the young and to any inclined to be careless. Therefore the divine instruction that a battlement be built to completely surround the house-top; otherwise the owner of the house was held responsible if any one fell from thence, and so was slain.

The house-top is a fitting picture of assembly privilege. For, as gathered to the name of the

Lord Jesus, believers are in the place of retirement from the distracting things of the world, of communion with the Father and the Son, and with one another, in the Spirit's power, and this is likewise the place of prayer and of testimony. But hallowed as such a place is, there are always the young in Christ and those weak in the faith to be considered. Pre-eminently for their sakes it is imperative that the wall of separation (not only from the world, but from worldly Christianity) be maintained, otherwise many of these little ones will fall from this hallowed sphere of privilege into which grace has brought them.

And here I desire to quote the words of a brother beloved, written in a private letter some time since, but which I feel are of value for all believers desiring so to walk as to please God, not only individually, but in corporate testimony: "By some an attempt is being made to pull down the barriers of truth and make us give up what we have. If the younger men among us, who are soon to take the lead, if the Lord tarry yet a while, are not true in practice to the truth, not only of the gospel but also of the Church of God, the truth itself will slip away from them. As I see the developments all around, I burn with jealousy for the truth we have. It makes us, in its practice, a people rejected by all, but who have the bread that *all need*. If we keep separated from every movement which leaves out what hurts in the truth; if we just live out in prac-

tice what the truth is, we will remain no doubt a small, unpopular people, but we will be to the end God's vessel of truth to His whole Church on earth; and that will be ten thousand times better throughout eternity than to have been on popular lines for greater access to men.

"Our assemblies, if kept truly pure, are little fortresses for the defence and sallying out of truth. Let us build them up strong, solid and faithful. . . Principles of independency *annul the constitution* of the Church of God as laid down in Ephesians, and make it impossible for us therefore to carry out its by-laws, as I may call them, given us in Corinthians."\*

These are sound and seasonable words, and form a fitting introduction to the special lines of divine truth emphasized in this instructive portion of the word of God, the book of Nehemiah.

The years that have passed since they were written have witnessed the rapid development of apostasy in the form of Modernism, making it more imperative than ever that real believers should walk in separation from those who deny every fundamental truth of Scripture.

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\* Extracted from a letter by P. J. Loizeaux.

## CHAPTER I

### AN EXERCISED MAN

**I**N the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, his cup-bearer, Nehemiah, the son of Hachaliah, was in deep exercise of soul concerning the condition of the re-gathered remnant, whose history we have been studying, as related by Ezra the Scribe.\* Nehemiah means *comfort* or *consolation of Jehovah*, and he is one whose name expresses his character, as is so often the case in Scripture, when names were not given by any means so carelessly as now. Like Paul, he was to comfort others with the comfort wherewith he himself was comforted of God (2 Cor. 1:4). This is a weighty principle in God's ways with His servants. Many a saint is permitted to go through deep waters, to pass through severe trial both of body and mind, not only for his own profit, but that he may be the better fitted to be a channel of blessing to his brethren when cast down and in distress. Happy is the saint who is thus subject to the will of God and enabled to be His agent in consoling his discouraged fellows and restoring them, through a ministry received in times of sorrow, when they are backslidden and disheartened.

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\* See "Notes on the Book of Ezra," by the same.

The station of Nehemiah was one of worldly prosperity. It is true he was a servant; probably a bondman, but so were all his people; and he dwelt in a royal palace, and seems to have been a favorite with the king. But, like Moses, his heart was with his lowly brethren, and his spirit was zealous for the testimony of the Lord.

To him, Hanani, one of his brethren, and other Jews came, whom he questioned closely concerning the remnant who had gone up to Jerusalem. The report was not encouraging. They replied: "The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach; the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire" (ver. 3). That Hanani felt this keenly there can be no doubt, but that he, or his companions were before God about it, as was Nehemiah, seems scarcely probable. It is one thing to shake the head and sigh over the vicissitudes of the congregation of the Lord, it is quite another to look up to Him to give deliverance, and to put His truth and testimony above every other interest. This latter Nehemiah did.

His brethren's unhappy report caused him deepest searching of heart and contrition of spirit, so that he gave himself to fasting and prayer with many tears; for, like Paul in a brighter dispensation, he knew much of what it was to weep over the failures of the people of God. To Him who had forsaken His city and given His

people up to captivity, but who had granted a little reviving in their bondage, Nehemiah turned in prayer. He uses the same title so frequently found in the record of Ezra, "the God of heaven." This indicated the removal of God's throne from earth to heaven. In deepest humiliation he joins with Ezra and Daniel in confessing his sin and the sin of his people. "We have sinned," he cries; and again, "Both I and my father's house have sinned;" and once more, "We have dealt very corruptly." Genuine confession like this reaches the ear of God. It indicates a soul able to look at matters from God's standpoint. Nehemiah is no carping critic, no self-satisfied Pharisaic looker-on upon the failure of others. "I thank Thee that I am not as other men" would never come from his lips. Instead, he bows his head in common confession with his brethren, and brokenly cries, "We have sinned."

But he is a man of faith as well as a man of prayer, and so he at once proceeds to remind God, as it were, of His own word; how He had declared in Lev. 26: 40-45 and Deut. 4: 23; 30: 1-6 that even though He might scatter His people because of their transgression, yet if in the stranger's land they would turn unto Him, keep His commandments, and do them, He would gather them again, though it were from the uttermost parts of the earth, and bring them back to the place He had chosen, "to set His name there." This promise Nehemiah pleads, and touchingly



cries: "Now these are Thy servants and Thy people, whom Thou hast redeemed by Thy great power and by Thy strong hand. O Lord, I beseech Thee, let now Thine ear be attentive to the prayer of Thy servant, and to the prayer of Thy servants who desire to fear Thy name: and prosper, I pray Thee, Thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man" (vers. 10, 11). "This man" was none other than the great Artaxerxes himself; but to Nehemiah he was just a man, and he desired that his heart might be controlled by God for the furtherance of His purpose of grace towards His people.

In other circumstances he could and did give honor to whom honor was due. But in the presence of the great King of kings this puissant monarch was but a man, and such is he in Nehemiah's reckoning. He had, in large measure, learned to put not his trust in princes, but to cease from man whose breath is in his nostrils. To the living God he looked; on His compassion and omnipotence he reckoned; and the sequel shows that he was not disappointed.

## CHAPTER II

### THE FAILED TESTIMONY

**I**T pleased the God of heaven, in bringing about an answer to His servant's petition, to attract the attention of the Persian ruler to the grief-stricken face of Nehemiah. Kindly the monarch inquires after the cause of this change of countenance, for the son of Hachaliah had been wont to exhibit a cheerful mien, as became one whose confidence was in the Lord. "Why is thy countenance sad," asks the king, "seeing thou art not sick? This is nothing else but sorrow of heart." Fearful of his sovereign's displeasure, his cup-bearer replies, "Let the king live forever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my father's sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?" (ver. 23). Nehemiah could not be indifferent to a matter of this kind. He was no misanthropical pessimist—rather indeed the very opposite—but he could not be unmoved by the terrible breakdown on the part of his loved people and the desolate condition of that city that should have been the glory of the whole earth.

But, observe, he did not stand aside and write pamphlets on the failure of his brethren or simply denounce them for their backslidings while doing nothing to help them reach a better state; nor

did he wash his hands of the whole matter and conclude that because the failure had indeed come in, he was justified in giving up all concern about the testimony committed to Judah. Not at all. His was a grief deep and genuine; but it was one that led to exercise before God, and an earnest desire to be an instrument in the hand of the Lord for the establishment of the truth, and the recovery and encouragement of the feeble few who had broken down so sadly in the very place where Jehovah had set His name.

And so when the king inquired, "For what dost thou make request?" he did not answer till he had "prayed to the God of heaven." What an atmosphere of prayer surrounds this man! It is his constant resource throughout all his varied experiences. He walked with God because he talked with God. Now, assured of the Lord's mind, he made request for permission to visit the land of Judah and the city of Jerusalem, that he might "build it." This was morally very lovely. He desired to build, to edify. Any one with a small measure of discernment can stand off and either bewail or criticize the failures of others, but one must needs be in touch with God to be a true builder. Such an one was Paul, "a wise master-builder," and he, by the Spirit, directs that "all things be done unto edifying." "Knowledge," he tells us, "puffeth up, but love edifieth" (or, buildeth up). This is an all-important truth.

Many there are who entered on the path of

separation with high hopes and fond expectations ; eagerly they drank in the precious truths the Holy Spirit of God was making known in the place where He had liberty to work as He would. But to-day, alas, alas ! many of these have turned away disheartened, and that because of breakdown on the part of brethren whom these others deem less clear of sight, less devoted and less intelligent than themselves. So they stand off and bewail the divided condition, the worldliness, the cold-heartedness that has come in among those who sought to walk together in separation from the prevailing apostasy. But to what end ? Such a course profits neither those who so judge, nor those judged. Better, a thousand times better, to rise up in the spirit of Nehemiah, and throw oneself in the breach as a builder. The heart may be grieved and the countenance sad, but there will be a deep-toned joy in seeking thus to enlighten, instruct, and edify weaker brethren : endeavoring in the fear of God to keep the Spirit's unity in the bond of peace, and occupy saints with the blessed Gatherer Himself instead of the failure of those gathered.

Yes, as the days darken and the dispensation fast hastens to its close, it is men of the Nehemiah stamp who will be of real value to the people of God, and who shall thus save themselves and those who hear them.

In the presence of his consort, Artaxerxes gave the desired permission, stipulating a defined

leave of absence, in which Nehemiah would be free to carry out the desire of his heart, and go to his brethren as a true prophet to speak words of exhortation, edification and encouragement (ver. 6). All that may be needed for the work of building is granted by the king, even as the King of kings, who is also head of His body, the Church, delights to supply His willing workers with all things that pertain to the ministry committed to them. And here we note that Ezra and Nehemiah were men of like mind in tracing every blessing to the good hand of God (ver. 8).

The intervening journey soon completed (for a burning love urged him on), Nehemiah crosses the river and presents the king's letters to the governors of the mixed Samaritan people, who had been settled in the land of the ten tribes since the days of Esar-haddon. At once we read of two men who are grieved and displeased; they were Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite, called contemptuously, Tobiah the *servant*. When they heard of his arrival, "it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel" (ver. 10). As these men caused Nehemiah much trouble and concern later on, it will be well to inquire here as to who or what they might represent, and to ask if any such adversaries are likely to be encountered to-day in connection with the defence of the "present truth."

Sanballat is called a Horonite, generally supposed to mean a native of Horonaim, a city of Moab. Of Tobiah's ancestry we are left in no doubt. We have therefore in these two foes representatives of those hostile races of whom it was written, "The Moabite and the Ammonite should not come into the congregation of God forever," as we are reminded later in chapter 13: 1. The prohibition in Deut. 23: 3-6 gives the reason for this: "An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the Lord forever: because they met you not with bread and water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt; and because they hired against thee Balaam the son of Beor of Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse thee. Nevertheless...the Lord thy God turned the curse into a blessing unto thee, because the Lord thy God loved thee. Thou shalt not seek their peace nor their prosperity all thy days forever."

Reading such a command, we naturally ask why such a doom upon Moab and Ammon for refusing aid to Israel when about to enter the land of promise? Why should it have been expected of them and not of others? The answer is very simple. There were ties of blood that gave Israel right to expect their assistance, but these ties were utterly repudiated. Moab and Ammon were the natural sons of Lot, but by his own daughters! They were really then "bastards, and not sons"

(Heb. 12:8). They surely speak to us of those professing to be children of God, but not born of the Spirit. And so they ever, as born only of the flesh, persecuted the spiritual seed. They are the representatives of fleshly religion, of carnal profession, and as such they detest reality, and hate the truth that, "Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." They feel they have as much right to the ordinances of God, and as much liberty to participate in His service and worship as any; but they are only natural men with a veneer of religiousness, and such have ever been the bitterest opponents of what really honors Christ and glorifies God. They abound to-day as they have abounded all down the centuries, and their object is still, as ever, to corrupt if they can, and to destroy if they cannot corrupt.

Leaving Sanballat and Tobiah for the present, gnashing their teeth in their rage and vexation, we follow Nehemiah to the city of God. Reaching Jerusalem, he rested three days. Then, conferring not with flesh and blood, but taking a few men with him, though telling none what God had put in his heart, he arose in the night and went out to view in silence the ruin that had come in. This night journey around the walls of the city is deeply pathetic. Who that has any real care for the people of God has not known something of it? The nobles and rulers and all the people are wrapt in slumber, but this lonely man, whose heart God has touched, keeps his midnight vigil, and

goes from gate to gate and tower to tower, noting with deepest sorrow and concern the breaches sin has made. "I went out by night," he says, "by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire. Then I went on to the gate of the fountain, and to the king's pool: but there was no place for the beast that was under me to pass. Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back and entered by the gate of the valley, and so returned" (vers. 13-15). It was no carping critic viewing with indifferent feelings the defencelessness of his brethren; but a man of purpose and prayer, beholding what stirred his soul to its depths, with the desire to build up what carnal ease and self-seeking had permitted to fall into ruin.

It was not till after this night view that he called the people, with their rulers and the priests of the Lord together, to give them cognizance of his mission. He does so most delicately. There are no reproaches, no Pharisaic and odious comparisons or contrasts, but he identifies himself fully with them and says: "Ye see the distress that we are in; how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach" (ver. 17). Such an one is a God-sent and Spirit-qualified leader. He does not



say, "You are in distress;" but "We are." He does not command, "Go, and build," but he entreats, "Let us build." He does not say, "You are a reproach," but he pleads, "Let us be no more a reproach." And then he tells of the good hand of his God upon him, and of the king's commission.

The people are aroused and encouraged, and cry at once, "Let us rise up and build;" and so they join hands with God's dear servant for the work he has planned. No doubt there was not the exercise of soul in all that conditions called for; but the work must be done nevertheless, and there will be more exercise as they go on.

And now we hear of Sanballat and Tobiah again; and with them a third adversary, Geshem the Arabian. This man is either an Edomite or an Ishmaelite, more probably the latter; but in either case he speaks of the flesh warring against the Spirit. Both Ishmael and Esau were types of the natural man—hence of the flesh—and were opposed to Isaac and Jacob, the seed of promise. Geshem is elsewhere in this book called Gashmu. When this unworthy trio hear of the work contemplated at the place of the Name, they indulge in sarcastic merriment. Nehemiah noted that, "They laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king?" (ver. 19).

Heretofore the line of demarcation between the outwardly separated Israelites and these mixed nations had been almost obliterated; hence there

was peace and quietness. But now a man has come who contemplates rearing afresh the wall of exclusion, and this is bitterly resented, though at first they attempt but to laugh down the determination of the remnant. To all their sneers Nehemiah calmly replies: "The God of heaven, He will prosper us; and therefore we His servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem!" (ver. 20). He has thrown down the gauntlet and declares his uncompromising attitude in a manner not to be misunderstood. Henceforth he will be hated as only those can hate who resent having their false religious claims made nothing of!

The out-and-out worldling does not hate what is truly of God so bitterly as the Christless professor who has a name that he lives but is dead. Such an one cannot bear spiritual realities; for when confronted with them the hollowness of his profession is exposed, like Dagon when the ark of Jehovah was set down before it. This explains the bitterness with which these adversaries opposed the work of God going on at Jerusalem.

## CHAPTER III

### THE GATES OF JERUSALEM

**T**HE work at once began, and it is to be noted what a thoroughly individual thing it was. Nehemiah is the servant used to stir up the rest; but they *are* stirred up, and "To every man his work" is the motto that might well describe the busy scene. This chapter is like a page from the books of God's record of service, and will doubtless be opened at the judgment seat of Christ, when each will be rewarded for his own work—and some who shirked, alas, will then suffer loss. For both the workers and the shirkers are here mentioned, and here their names shall stand till the Lord Himself has pronounced His judgment upon all. Such records are deeply instructive, and deserve to be pondered with care that they may stir up our minds by way of remembrance.

In the New Jerusalem there are to be twelve gates (Rev. 21: 12), and each several gate of one pearl; so that, look upon the city from whichever standpoint one may, he will be reminded of the precious truth that Christ "loved the Church, and gave Himself for it" (Eph. 5: 25). He came from heaven as a merchantman seeking goodly pearls; and having found one pearl of great price, He bought it, at the cost of all that He

had; "though He was rich, for our sakes He became poor," that we might be rich. And that heavenly city, of which Christ is the centre and the lamp for the display of God's glory, has "a wall great and high," speaking, as did the wall of the earthly city, of security and exclusion.

Jerusalem in Nehemiah's day seems to have had twelve gates also, though only ten are mentioned in this chapter: but in chapter 8:16 we read of "the gate of Ephraim," and in 12:39 of "the prison gate." The ten mentioned in the present portion remind us of the number that, it has been well said, sets forth responsibility towards God and man, of which the ten words in the law were the measure; while the twelve of the heavenly city (and note how many twelves there are in Rev. 21), as some have suggested, would set forth perfect administration, or governmental completeness, only to be known in the day that the kings of the earth bring the glory and the honor of the nations unto it.

I have thought there might be divine lessons for us in the names and order of these gates. That there is danger always of being fanciful, I realize. An insubject imagination is only "evil continually" (Gen. 6:5), in the things of the Lord as well as in all else, and one would therefore seek to avoid it. But, in looking at these gates, it is not so much my thought to seek to give the interpretation of them as to make a practical application of truth which, I am convinced, is

much needed in this Laodicean day. We shall therefore take them in their order, as we go through the chapter, noting likewise the interesting and instructive points brought out in connection with service as we go from port to port.

We begin, then, with

#### THE SHEEP GATE,

of which we read in the first verse: "Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests, and they builded the sheep gate; they sanctified it, and set up the doors of it; even unto the tower of Meah they sanctified it, unto the tower of Hananeel."

This was priestly work indeed, for through this gate the beasts were led whose death and bloodshedding were to picture the one Offering of the ninth of Hebrews. They pointed on to the perfect sacrifice of that unnamed One of Isaiah 53, who was "led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He openeth not His mouth."

Thankful we are that for us it is not necessary to ask, as did the eunuch, "Of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?" (Acts 8: 34). The other Man is well known indeed to those of us who have been brought to trust the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all. In Him we have beheld the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world (John 1: 29).

The Sheep Gate clearly speaks to us, then, of the Cross. It was at the Sheep Gate the Lord met the palsied man and healed him, as recorded in John 5, as it is at the Cross the helpless sinner finds life and peace. Here the remnant of old began to build the wall, priestly hands piling stone upon stone, and setting up the beams and bars. And here every one must begin who has really to do with God, other than in judgment. The wall, we have already seen, speaks of holiness, which must shut out evil; but what evil is, we can never rightly know until we have understood in some measure the meaning of the Cross. It was there that all the iniquity of man's heart was fully revealed; there too that the absolute holiness of God's character was declared in an even more marked way than it will be made known in the lake of fire. In the Cross it was that mercy and truth met together, and that righteousness and peace kissed each other (Ps. 85: 10).

“'Tis in the cross of Christ we see  
How God can save, yet righteous be.”

The most important truth of Scripture is, that on the cross the judgment of a holy God against sin fell upon His spotless Son, when He “suffered, the Just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God” (1 Pet. 3: 18). There is nothing like the apprehension of this to give peace to a troubled soul. I have been awakened to see myself a lost, guilty sinner. Perhaps for years I have been go-

ing about to establish my own righteousness, and trusting that all would surely be well with me because of fancied merit in myself. I have deluded myself with the notion that God, who is love, must therefore allow sin to pass unpunished, or that my sin was, at any rate, of weight so light it would never sink me down to the pit of woe. But now all is changed. I have learned that I am a lost man! My sins, which once seemed like trifles, insignificant as molehills, now rise before my terrified vision as dark, shapeless mountains, which I fear will bury me beneath their awful weight in the nethermost depths of the abyss of divine wrath. I look on my right hand, but I find no helper. Refuge fails me. In my despair I cry out, "No man cares for my soul!" (Ps. 142: 4); and in the hour of my deepest distress there comes to me One with feet beautiful upon the mountains, a messenger, one among a thousand, who tells me the good news that God, the God whom I have so grievously sinned against and so flagrantly dishonored, has found a ransom, and can thus deliver me from going down into the pit (Job 33: 24). My sins and guilt have all been laid on Jesus. My judgment has fallen upon His holy head, and thus I can go righteously free.

Well does such a message deserve the name of "gospel!" Good news indeed! More welcome than cold water to a thirsty soul!

As of old, when Noah took of every clean beast and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt-offer-

ings upon the altar (Gen. 8: 20), so now Jehovah has looked upon the work of His beloved Son and "smelled a sweet savor," which is truly a "savor of rest" (*margin*); for sin is thus canceled, and God can be just and the Justifier of him that believeth in Jesus. Christ thus becomes the Door of the sheep, as He said: "I am the door; by Me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture" (John 10: 9).

Of all this, and more also, may the Sheep Gate remind us. A gate of judgment it is too; for of judgment, in Scripture, the gate often speaks, as in Oriental cities it was there that justice was administered. But here it is judgment falling, not upon the guilty, but upon the guiltless One who voluntarily stood in the place of the sinner. "He was delivered for our offences, and raised again for our justification; therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 4: 25; 5: 1).

All thus justified are now the sheep of the Good Shepherd who died, the Great Shepherd who lives in glory, the Chief Shepherd who is coming again. As His sheep, they have title to enter in through the gate into the city. It is saved souls, *and they alone*, who here on earth are gathered by the Spirit to the name of the Lord Jesus in separation from the world and its evil, and it is such alone who will be within that wall of jasper gathered around the Lamb in the glory.

Let me press it upon the reader—has all this



been made good to your soul? Is your confidence for eternity based upon the work of Christ? Are you trusting alone in Jesus, who in those solemn hours of deeper than Egyptian darkness, "fought the fight alone," vanquished Satan's power in resurrection, and is now exalted at God's right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour?

Oh, be persuaded! If you are resting on anything short of this, your soul is in peril most grave and fearful; for it is only "the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, that cleanses from all sin" (1 Jno. 1:7). If, however, this is the ground of your confidence, if you are saved and know it, if the lesson of the Sheep Gate has been truly learned in the presence of God, I ask you to pass on with me now to

#### THE FISH GATE.

But on the way there is a small portion of the wall being built by the men of Jericho. Jericho was the city of the curse, but "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us; as it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree." So these happy Jericho men are now in the place of blessing, and serving in newness of spirit. Next to them builds, apparently alone, Zaccur, the son of Imri, but God's eye is upon him, and he shall find his name on the honor roll in the day of Christ. Then we read: "But the Fish Gate did the sons of Has-senaah build, who also laid the beams thereof,

and set up the doors thereof, the locks thereof and the bars thereof" (ver. 3).

The name of this port at once brings to mind the word of the Lord addressed to Simon and Andrew when He found them "casting a net into the sea." "He saith unto them, Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." Precious it is to learn that, without a word as to delay, they "*straightway* left their nets and followed Him" (Matt. 4: 17-20).

It is a weighty truth, often I fear forgotten in this pushing, restless age, that the great business of those already saved should be to bring others to Christ. Alas, alas, the indifference as to this among many of the people of God is most appalling! The Fish Gate is closed, or fallen in ruins, and there are no devoted "sons of Has-senaah" who are enough in earnest about the condition of the lost to build it up again. Is it not a shame, a crying shame, that it should ever be true of saints going to heaven, that they are unconcerned about sinners going to hell? And God has said, "He that withholdeth corn, the people shall curse him."

Oh, the heartlessness of it! Souls perishing under one's very eyes, and no voice raised to proclaim God's message of love to the lost! Brothers, sisters, be honest with God! Face the question in His presence, *What are you doing for souls?* Will friends, neighbors, relatives, rise up in that day and say: "I lived beside him for years; he knew

I was going to hell; he never warned me, nor told me of a way of escape." I beseech you, don't turn it aside with pious expressions about, "So much fleshly energy," and "the need of building up the saints." Words like these from men who lift not a finger to keep others from going down to eternal ruin, are disgusting indeed; yea, they are worse; they are actually wicked and abhorrent in the ears of Him who saith, "He that is wise winneth souls" (R. V.).

Build up the Fish Gate, brethren; go out after the lost, and bring them inside the wall, where, having been saved, they will be cared for and helped in the things of God.

I know all have not the same gift; all cannot preach to thousands. But surely it is not gift that is lacking so much as grace. It takes no special gift to distribute gospel tracts, or speak a loving word in season to needy souls. If you have "gift" enough to spend hours talking about the weather, or the various questions of domestic, business, or political life, you have all the gift that is needed to drop a tender, warning message in the ear of a careless one, or to point an anxious person to Christ.

Let none shirk this work, for the day of manifestation draws on apace. Then His eyes that are as a flame of fire will pierce into every hidden motive, every unworthy, selfish thought, and bring all to light. In verse 4 we read of three who repaired the stretch of wall adjoining the

Fish Gate, and then we read of the Tekoites; and the Holy Ghost has noted that "their nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord" (ver. 5). They will have to face this record at the judgment-seat of Christ; and I fear there are some God-made, and many self-made, "nobles" among the people of the Lord to-day who manifest as gross indifference to the work of God.

That, on the other hand, mere fleshly zeal will not be owned of God, I quite admit; and this brings before us the need of enforcing the lessons suggested by the next five gates.

#### THE OLD GATE.

"Moreover the old gate repaired Jehoiada the son of Paseah, and Meshullam the son of Besodeiah; they laid the beams thereof, and set up the doors thereof, and the locks thereof, and the bars thereof."

One would not try to be too insistent on the special meaning of this gate. I had thought of it as the old used in the new, the place of nature in the economy of grace; for our bodies, with all their marvelous members, belong to the old creation still; but He who will glorify them by and by finds use for them in His own service even now in the day of their humiliation.

But the suggestion of another that the old gate would be the port of entry for the old path seems a clearer and higher thought. It is in Jeremiah 6: 16 that we read: "Thus saith the Lord, Stand

ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest to your souls." And so the Old Gate might speak of subjection to the revealed will of God—abiding in that which was from the beginning. This still impresses upon us the great truth that we are called to recognize in all things the Lordship of Christ, and to hold every power we possess at His command, serving with grace in the heart.

"Naught that I have mine own I call,  
I hold it for the Giver;  
My heart, my strength, my life, my all,  
Are His and His forever."

Evil is not in natural things themselves, but is in the abuse of them. Every talent we have is to be used for His glory. Woe to the man who hides one of them away, under pretence that nature, in this sense, is opposed to grace!

This is what the Holy Spirit presses upon us when He says: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (Rom. 12:1). The child of God should remember that he has been bought with a price. His body is purchased with the blood of Christ. He is not merely called to "consecrate" himself, as people put it to-day, but to gladly own that he is already consecrated by the death of the Lord Jesus. The blood and the

oil have been placed on the ear, the hand and the foot—he belongs to Christ. The ear, to listen for His commandment; the hand, to do His bidding; the foot, to run in His ways (see Lev. 14: 14-18, 25, 28, 29).

Can anyone truly enter into this, and yet be careless in regard to service? Impossible. You are not only saved from hell, but purchased to be the bondman of Jesus Christ.

There is a depth of meaning in that word “present,” as noted above. Your body is His already. He might simply demand His own; but in grace He says, “I beseech you . . . present your body.” Have you done so? Have you, in other words, owned His claims upon you? If not, will you longer delay? O beloved, yield yourself unto Him, that thus you may bring forth fruit unto God. “Herein is My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit” (John 15: 8).

I do not press it that the Old Gate was meant to teach this special truth, and I trust none will find fault over an application.

Whatever the meaning one more spiritually-minded may discern, the fact remains that “Ye are not your own; ye are bought with a price.” It is this I seek to emphasize, for it is with many, well-nigh forgotten. Vast numbers of Christians live as though their only thought was to enjoy the present scene, “on the east of Jordan;” pampering every whim of their blood-purchased bodies, and looking forward to going to heaven at last without

having ever known the toil and conflict—yet the deep, hidden joy—of the servant's path.

Especially is this often so of those in comfortable and easy circumstances. The willing workers of verse 8 might well rebuke such. "Next unto him repaired Uzziel the son of Harhaiah of the goldsmiths. Next unto him also repaired Hananiah the son of one of the apothecaries." I question if goldsmiths' and apothecaries' sons had known much of downright hard labor, but here we see them hard at work helping to fortify Jerusalem. God has not forgotten that their soft white hands became hardened and sun-burned as they used trowel and mortar on the walls of the holy city.

Nor would I pass over the Gibeonites, Melatiah and the men of Gibeon (ver. 7), whether by these we are to understand descendants of the once wily deceivers who entrapped Joshua into disobedience, or Israelites indeed, dwelling in the ancient city. In either case, we may be reminded of what we once were, and what grace has made us.

After the goldsmiths and the apothecaries, repaired Rephaiah, the son of Hur, ruler of half of Jerusalem. He did not hire a servant to do the work for him, but though a man of wealth and power, he labored with his hands, and the Lord took note of his devotedness.

In verse 10 we read of a man whose sphere of labor was very circumscribed but very necessary. Jedaiah repaired "over against his house." This

is noteworthy. Many of God's people can do little in a public way in His service, but they can each be concerned about maintaining the wall over against their own houses. And this is tremendously important. It is useless to talk of separation in the assembly, if there be not separation maintained at home. If the children are allowed to go into the world, or to bring the world into the home, depend upon it, the public testimony will avail for little. Godly words in the meeting and worldly ways in the house, will soon disgust neighbors and friends, and prove the undoing of the household.

Another edifying spectacle is afforded us in verse 12: "Next unto him repaired Shallum the son of Halohesh, the ruler of the half part of Jerusalem, *he and his daughters.*" It must have been a grand sight to behold this ruler and his daughters so zealously affected in a good thing. Our sisters have here a bright example of devotedness to the Lord. Would that it might be followed by thousands more!

Oft-times, one fears, where the truth is known that women are called upon to be in subjection, and not to lead in public work (after the fashion of the day), there is a settling down on the part of many sisters to a life of inaction and spiritual desuetude. But all work is not of a public character, as we have already had occasion to observe. There are many ways and abundant opportunities afforded godly women to labor, both in the



gospel and in building up the wall of protection and exclusion of evil, without appearing on the platform and usurping authority over the man. Let there be but a willing mind, and it will not be necessary to bewail the lack of opportunities for women's service in a scriptural way.

But if any are to be used of God, there must be not only this recognizing of His claims upon us, but also that lowliness of spirit that ever commends a servant. So we pass on to

#### THE VALLEY GATE.

"The valley gate repaired Hanun, and the inhabitants of Zanoah" (ver. 13).

This surely suggests humility—a willingness to take a lowly place that thus the Lord may be exalted. One fears it is a gate little used by many of us nowadays.

Pride is ever characteristic of fallen creatures, who have nothing to be proud of; for "what hast thou that thou hast not received?" Even in connection with service for the Lord, how this unholy thing creeps in, leading one servant to be jealous of another, instead of catching the Master's voice as He says, "What is that to thee? Follow *thou Me!*"

What Cowper says of sin in general may be predicated of pride in particular:

"It twines itself about my thoughts,  
And slides into my prayer."

It is indeed the root-sin of all. By it Satan himself fell, and one "being lifted up with pride, falls into the condemnation of the devil."

God has said, "To this man will I look; to him that is humble, and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at My word." It is perhaps merely a truism to write that only as one walks humbly before Him, is he in a condition of soul to be safely used in service. I do not mean that God cannot overrule all things, and in a sense use even the basest of men. The devil himself has to serve. God used Balaam, and others equally ungodly. But in such cases it is to the condemnation of the very one used.

To go on preaching and handling the truth of God while the heart is lifted up and the eyes lofty is one of the most dangerous courses one can take, and certain to end in ruin and disaster.

We have much cause, as we contemplate our coldness and indifference, and the appalling power of the world over us, to be on our faces before God, instead of walking in pride, only to learn eventually that He "is able to abase" us, as in the case of Babylon's haughty king. If we humble not ourselves, He must humble us in His own way, for it is part of His purpose to "hide pride from man."

Keeping this, then, before our minds, we pass on to the solemn and much-needed lesson of

**THE DUNG GATE.**

“But the dung gate repaired Malchiah the son of Rechab, the ruler of part of Beth-haccerem” (ver. 14). Humbling work this, for a ruler, but necessary labor surely.

The Dung Gate was the port whence they carried forth the filth, that the city might not be defiled. And so we read, “Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7: 1).

Real blessing there cannot be if this is forgotten; but if we have truly learned the lesson of the Valley Gate, that of the Dung Gate will be no difficulty. As saints and servants we are called, not to uncleanness, but to holiness. We are to cleanse ourselves; that is, to judge, in the presence of God, and turn away from, all filthiness—let its form be the grosser one of the flesh, or the less objectionable (in the eyes of men) of the spirit.

In the first three chapters of Romans we have sharply delineated the naked hideousness of the filthiness of the flesh. In the first three chapters of 1st Corinthians and in the 2nd of Colossians, we have unveiled the filthiness of the spirit: a mind exalting itself against God and His Christ—a wisdom that is earthly, sensual, devilish. So we read elsewhere of the “desires of the flesh

and of the mind," in which we *once* walked. (See Eph. 2.)

From all these things we are now called to cleanse ourselves. Body and mind alike are to be preserved free from impurity, for the glory of God.

"Flee also youthful lusts" is a much-needed word. In the world about us, men live to pander to the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. It should be otherwise with the Christian, and must be otherwise if he is to be a vessel unto honor, sanctified and meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work. Down with the bars of the Dung Gate, brethren; out with the filth! "Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord."

Thus we pass on our journey round the walls, and come next to

#### THE GATE OF THE FOUNTAIN.

"The gate of the fountain repaired Shallun the son of Col-hozeh, the ruler of part of Mizpah" (ver. 15).

To the woman at the well, the Lord Jesus spoke of a fountain (not merely a well) of living water. Again in John 7 He cried, "He that believeth on Me...out of his inward parts shall flow rivers of living water." The fountain of living water is a type, or symbol of the Holy Spirit who indwells all believers.

It has been asserted by many that until the

Christian surrenders himself fully to God, he does not receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. This is a mistake. "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His" (Rom. 8:9); "After that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise" (Eph. 1:13)—sealed, too, "until the day of redemption" (Eph. 4:30); "Because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts" (Gal. 4:6).

But that there is often in the experience of many what looks, indeed, like a "second blessing," no observant believer can deny. What is really meant by it? Simply this: that though the Holy Spirit indwells all children of God in this dispensation, yet, in many, worldliness and self-pleasing are so characteristic, that He who should control us for Christ, and fill us with freshness and power as He ministers Christ to our souls, is become like a fountain choked with stones and rubbish, and thus the life is barren and the testimony powerless. Awakened at last to see the folly of such a life of uselessness to God and reproach to Christ, the saint humbles himself in self-judgment, the filth is put away, and now the once-choked fountain is running over, and the Spirit of God in power takes control of the believer to use him for the Lord's glory, and to make him a vessel of refreshment to others. There is a fountain of living water within, and out of his inward parts flow rivers of living water for others (John 7:38).

“Be ye filled with the Spirit” is a word the importance of which cannot be over-estimated. May every child of grace go on to know more of it in power as he walks in obedience to the word of God! For there are two things that in Scripture are practically inseparable—I refer to the Spirit and the Word. A Spirit-filled Christian will be a Scripture-filled Christian.

In verses 16 to 25 we read of many persons who repaired that portion of the wall extending from the fountain gate to the water gate. There are fine shades and significant expressions used in several instances that we do well to notice. Of one and another we only read that they repaired such and such a portion. In verse 20, of Baruch we are told that he “*earnestly* repaired the other piece, from the turning of the wall,” etc. It is not for nothing God inserted that adverb. Three are mentioned in verse 23 who repaired over against their houses, and we can be sure every detail was precious to God. But passing on to verse 26 we reach

#### THE WATER GATE.

“Moreover the Nethinim dwelt in Ophel, unto the place over against the water gate toward the east, and the tower that lieth out.”

The Nethinim were servants, and it is meet that they should have the care of this gate, for water is very generally a type of the word of God. “Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?

By taking heed thereto according to Thy word" (Ps. 119:9).

We do not read of any repairs being made here, only that the Nethinim dwelt over against the water gate. Possibly this port needed none. At any rate, we know that of which it speaks needs not to be repaired, for the word of God liveth and abideth forever. All vain man's assaults upon it have left it uninjured and unchanged. We are called upon to defend it, contending earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the people of God, but it would be impiety to attempt to patch or improve it.

The water of the Word it is that Christ uses to wash His disciples' feet and to keep them free from defilement (Jno. 13:1-16; 15:3). It is written: "Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it by the washing of water by the Word," etc. (Eph. 5:25, 26.)

It is remarkable that what in Ephesians is connected with the Spirit, is in Colossians linked with the Word. Compare Eph. 5:18-20 with Col. 3:16. Both alike are a source of joy and blessing. And we need not wonder at this similarity in effect, for of the Word it is said, "Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."

In chapter 8 of this book (Nehemiah) we see all the people gathered together "as one man into the street that was before the water gate," there to

listen to the reading of the word of God. The result is joy and blessing.

O fellow-believer, I beseech you, "meditate on these things, give thyself wholly to them," and thus shall your profiting appear to all, as you "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly," for, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3: 16, 17). This, then, is the servant's furnishing. He is to study to show himself "approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

And this means far more than reading books, however helpful, written on the Bible. It necessitates diligent, painstaking study of the sacred Word itself. Other books may help, often, to lead out the mind on certain broad lines, but *the* Book must supersede them all if there is to be real growth in the knowledge of God.

By this alone will you overcome the wicked one, if "the word of God abideth in you" (1 John 2: 14).

Another company of Tekoites repaired between the water gate and that which next claims our attention, namely:

#### THE HORSE GATE.

"From above the horse gate repaired the



priests, every one over against his house" (ver. 28).

The horse is used with striking frequency in Scripture as a figure of the warrior.

It is so described in Job 39: 19-25, where, "He saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha! and he smell-eth the battle afar off." In Zechariah 1: 8, and in Rev. 6, we read of four symbolic horses, which speak of warrior powers; and when the eternal Word of God, clad in blood-dipped vesture, descends from heaven to the battle preceding the awful supper of the great God, at the beginning of the Millennium, He is seen in vision riding on a white horse, and the saints are seen similarly mounted.

The ass is the symbol of peace; the horse, of war. When the Prince of Peace rode into Jerusalem of old, it was on the ass. When He comes to judgment, it is on the horse.

The Horse Gate may speak, then, of soldier-service in a world opposed to God and His truth. It bids us "earnestly contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3, R. V.).

The truth has been given to us at great cost, not only to the One who is Himself "the Truth," but for its preservation, and recovery when lost at times, myriads of warrior-saints have suffered and died.

Alas that we, children of such glorious sires, should so lightly value what to them was dearer than life! We live in a day not of open perse-

cution, but of laxity and latitudinarianism. We are affected much by the spirit of the times; hence there are few among us who, like that mighty man of old, grasp the sword of the Spirit to defend the truth of God, and fight till the hand cleaves to the very weapon it holds. (See 2 Sam. 23: 9, 10.) But God's Eleazars will have rich reward in the day when many, we fear, will be saved but so as by fire.

Let me quote here the words of another, which might well be written in letters of living fire:

"Renounce all the policy of the age. Trample upon Saul's armor. Grasp the Book of God. Trust the Spirit who wrote its pages. Fight with this weapon only and always. Cease to amuse, and seek to arouse. Shun the clap of a delighted audience, and listen for the sobs of a convicted one. Give up trying to *please* men who have only the thickness of their ribs between their souls and hell; and warn, and plead, and entreat, as those who feel the waters of eternity creeping upon them."\*

And remember, beloved, as you fight, that the day of testimony for God is fast passing away. It will soon be too late to stand for the truth, and too late to minister Christ to needy souls. "The night cometh when no man can work" (John 9: 4).

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\*Archibald Brown, of London.

Of this we are reminded as we pass on to

#### THE EAST GATE.

“After him repaired also Shemaiah the son of Shechaniah, the keeper of the east gate” (ver. 29).

The gate of the sunrising points on—does it not?—to the morning without clouds, when He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass, and as clear shining after rain.

Having shone forth as the Bright and Morning Star, and as such gathered His redeemed to Himself in the clouds, He will be manifested to Israel and the nations that are spared as the all-glorious Sun of Righteousness, with healing in His wings. This is the special character in which He is presented to Israel and the earth, but the two are only different aspects of His one coming again.

For that glad morning weary saints all along have waited and longed, straining their eyes to catch the first glimpse of the Bright and Morning Star. Wicked servants have said, “My Lord delayeth His coming;” but He “is not slack, as some men count slackness, but is long-suffering to usward, not willing that any should perish” (2 Pet. 3: 9). “The night is far spent, the day is at hand.” It is high time to be aroused from our lethargy, for already the long-expected midnight cry is ringing through the world, “Behold, the Bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet Him!” The shout of the Lord, the voice of the arch-

angel, and the trump of God, will soon resound through the vaulted heavens, announcing the return of the long-absent One, and ushering in the morning. But for many it will be the beginning of the darkest night earth has ever known.

Oh, let us be up and doing while it is called to-day, that we may not be ashamed before Him at His coming. "Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

Only a small part of the wall remains to be noticed, but among the workers upon it there is one we must not cursorily pass by. Meshullam the son of Berechiah repaired, we learn, "over against his chamber" (ver. 30). Here was a man who probably had no house, no real home. He was but a lodger; but even so, he was faithful to Him who appointed him to glorify God in that narrow place. He went to work with energy and repaired over against his one little room. And thus he becomes a bright example for every one in like circumstances, bidding such remember that "he that is faithful in that which is least, is faithful also in much."

#### THE GATE MIPHKAD

is the last in order. "After him repaired Malchiah the goldsmith's son unto the place of the Nethinim, and of the merchants, over against the gate Miphkad, and to the going up of the corner" (ver. 31).

The word Miphkad, according to the dictionaries, means review, or appointment (for judg-

ment). It was doubtless the gate where controversies were tried, after the Eastern fashion. How solemn is this! For it is when the Lord comes that "we must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ." That will be the Gate Miphkad for the believer. There will be the last great review. Every detail of the saint's life will come up for inspection. It may be then that,

"Deeds of merit, as we thought them,  
He will show us were but sin;  
Little acts we had forgotten,  
He will tell us were for Him."

Oh, the unspeakable solemnity of it! All our ease-loving and self-seeking brought to light then! All our pride and vanity manifested! Everything put on its own proper level. All our works inspected by Him who seeth not as man seeth. How many of us will wish we had been more true and real in our work down here. Things we valued highly on earth, how lightly will they weigh up there!—as the very small dust of the balance; yea, lighter even than that—altogether, lighter than vanity!

And those things we have neglected and foolishly ignored in the days of our pilgrimage, how much more precious than gold will they appear in the light of that judgment-seat!

O beloved, shall we not seek to be *now* what we shall then wish we had been? Let us do *now* what we shall then wish we had done; turn *now*

from what we shall then wish we had judged. The Lord grant that His people be awakened to the reality of these things, and the importance of living for eternity!

And thus we have traveled round the wall from one part to another, and have, I trust, been blessed in doing so. We might close our meditations here, only that God does not end in this way, for in the last verse we come back again, having made the circuit, to that with which we began—

#### THE SHEEP GATE.

“And between the going up of the corner unto the Sheep Gate repaired the goldsmiths and the merchants.”

It is as though God would not have us turn away without reminding us that the Cross with which we began will be before our souls for eternity. After all has been gone into at the judgment-seat, we shall turn from it to the Judge Himself, who is our Redeemer and Bridegroom. We shall see Him as a Lamb that had been slain. At His once-pierced feet we shall fall in adoration, and forever sing praises “unto Him that loveth us, and hath washed us from our sins in His own blood.”

We shall never get beyond the Cross. It will be the theme of our praises throughout all the ages to come. Oh, to ever live in the light of it now! It speaks of sins forever put away, and

also of a world under judgment for the rejection of God's Son. Our place, then, is outside of it all. "Let us go forth therefore unto Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come" (Heb. 13: 13, 14).

## CHAPTER IV

### SOLDIER-SERVANTS

**T**HE work which was so precious in the eyes of the Lord was but a theme for mockery and scorn in the mind of the mixed people, whose overtures of participation on common ground had been refused. Sanballat's rage is stirred; but for the present it takes outwardly the form of contemptuous sneering: "What do these feeble Jews?" he asks his Samaritan brethren. "Will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they make an end in a day? will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish which are burned?" And Tobiah the Ammonite joins in the mockery, exclaiming with a lightness he evidently did not feel, "Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall" (vers. 1-3). Yet he and all his ilk were to prove later that, when guarded by Jehovah's subject servants, it was too strong a wall for such foxes as they to break through.

In the name of the Lord, Nehemiah and his companions built steadily on, and that Name was to prove a strong tower into which the righteous might safely retreat from the malignity of their foes. When the people of God cleave to His Word and exalt His name, they need fear no enemy,



human or supernatural. It is *themselves* who are responsible for any breaches made in the wall. It is unbelief and self-will in the people of God that weaken or destroy those battlements against which the enemies outside might batter in vain.

Realizing this in some measure, the people of Judah lift up their hearts to the One whose they were and whom they served. "Hear, O our God; for we are despised," they cry; "and turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity; and cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before Thee; for they have provoked Thee to anger before the builders" (vers. 4, 5). If any feel the difference between this prayer and such as are suited to the Christian in this dispensation of grace, the explanation is involved in the question. That was not the time when grace and sufferance were enjoined. The dispensation of law was still in force, and we must view these utterances from that standpoint. The important thing for us to observe is the way in which the remnant cast themselves wholly upon God. Sanballat, Tobiah, and the rest are *His* enemies, not merely theirs, and they count on Him to deal with them.

And so they prayed and builded, for such is the force of "So built we the wall," in verse 6.

Thus with the help of God the breaches were repaired, for willing hands made light work, and "the people had a mind to work."

But soon the opposition took a different form. When the united nations (notice the lengthened list — Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabians and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites) heard that the work was actually nearing completion, and that the wall was being repaired in a substantial manner, their indignation became greater than ever. They had hoped the rubbish would impede the progress of the work to such an extent as to completely dishearten the Jews; but bit by bit this had been cleared away, and the stones uncovered and set in their places. Hence these enemies of what is of God realize something more than mockery is required if they would not soon be effectually shut out of the holy city.

As one reads such a record, it is almost impossible not to observe how accurately the history of old fits a later work of God—even that of the present time. As a result of centuries of darkness and superstition, practically every precious truth of the Scriptures was overwhelmed by the ecclesiastical rubbish gradually accumulated. When at last the reformers were raised up to recall God's people to God's own Word, they found themselves confronted by just such a task as that which Nehemiah had to face; and ever since, when there has been a settling down on the part of God's people, the rubbish has accumulated again at an alarming rate, human tradition soon swamping what was of God; and so the need of persistent, devoted, prayerful toil, to separate

the precious from the vile has been ever manifest. Carnal professors will mock, so-called liberals will demonstrate their bitter hatred of everything holy, but they who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, and find all needed grace to stand in the evil day, and to distinguish between what is really divine and what is but of man in the great mounds of mingled truth and error, lying all about the ruined wall that once separated Church and world. Every fresh attempt to "try the things that differ" will provoke the ire of the worldly-religious mass; but what is of God is of too much value to be surrendered at the behest of fleshly foes.

The adversaries of Judah determined upon a sudden onslaught on the remnant, and so "conspired all of them together to come and fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it" (ver. 8). This was but a call to "watch and pray," and so it was recognized by Nehemiah and his fellow-laborers. The language of verse 9 is most instructive: "Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them." This was holding things in the right proportion. Prayer alone would have been presumption. But they watch against the enemy at the same time that they call upon God.

In verse 10 we have the first note of discouragement from within. Constant toil and watching have worn upon the spirits of the Jews, and so the report comes to Nehemiah: "The strength

of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall." But to these disheartening words Nehemiah vouchsafes no reply, save to labor on. The adversaries continue their plotting without and the people grow faint within, but the Tirshatha continues to look up and count upon the living God.

The third trial is mentioned in verse 12. There were scattered Jews living among the Samaritans. They "came unto us ten times," says Nehemiah, warning of the preparations for an assault, and declaring the utter inability of the remnant to stand against such powerful foes.

It was certainly discouraging to one who relied on a fleshly arm, but the man of faith could count on God through it all. Heretofore the people had labored, prayed, and watched. Now they must be prepared for conflict. So the governor set the people after their families in the vantage-places upon the wall, armed with swords, spears and bows. But he would not have them put their confidence in the weapons, but in the living God: "Be ye not afraid of them; *remember the Lord*, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives and your houses" (ver. 14). This was to be their battle-cry, "Remember the Lord!"

Many a merely human conflict has been won by the inspiration of a watch-word recalling some past great event. In our own day, again and again,

Spanish troops were repulsed as the American soldiery drove all before them with the cry, "Remember the Maine!" So Napoleon often inspired his troops by causing them to remember some former victory. But what could stir the soul of an Israelite indeed more than such a cry as this, "*Remember the Lord!*" Similarly when pressing upon Timothy the need of devotedness in the Christian warfare, Paul cries, "Remember Jesus Christ!" (2 Tim. 2: 8).\*

This is faith's resource. The God who gave His Son for our redemption, who raised Him from the dead and set Him at His own right hand in highest glory, can be counted on in every time of trial to supply all needed grace for seasonable help.

When Nehemiah's enemies knew that their plans were known, and the citizens of Jerusalem armed and watchful, they gave up all hope of hindering by open warfare; while the remnant rejoiced that "God had brought their counsel to nought;" and so they returned every one with confidence to the work.

But this deliverance did not cause them to be any the less careful. Henceforth Nehemiah divided his own servants into two companies, one of which wrought in the work and the other stood guard heavily armed; while the builders and burden-

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\* The verse is really an exclamatory rather than a declarative sentence: "Remember Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, raised from the dead according to my gospel!"

bearers themselves labored, each with his sword girded by his side, or with a trowel in one hand and a weapon in the other. Both alike speak of the Word. The trowel is the Word used for edification, the sword is the Word used to contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Significant are the words that close verse 18, after this vivid description of soldier-laborers: "And he that sounded the trumpet was by me." The trumpet stands for the ministry of the Word, and it was meet that the trumpeter should abide with the ruler and get his instructions directly from him. So does the servant of Christ need to abide in Him that he may speak as the oracles of God, and then the trumpet gives no uncertain sound.

Scattered as the workers and soldiers were upon the whole length of the wall, it was important that all should be subject to one voice, the voice of Nehemiah, and this was expressed by the trumpet. Wherever the loud blast was heard, there all were to gather, counting upon God to fight for them (vers, 19, 20).

"So,"\* continues the inspired record, "we labored in the work: and half of them held the spears from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared."

There was much work to be done and time was

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\* This little word "so" is quite characteristic of Nehemiah. It is found about twenty times.

pressing, so they dared not take their ease while there was light enough to labor. And at night all lodged within the wall, that they might be a defence to their brethren, though many had homes outside the city.

In all this devoted service, Nehemiah and his guard were ensamples to the rest, for so continuously were they on duty that they did not so much as remove their clothes, save for washing. It was a time to try men's souls, but the testing only proved how zealously affected in a good thing were the governor and his helpers. In this they shine as examples for us, bidding us hold fast what God has committed to us, and hold forth the word of life to others, while refusing all compromise with the unholy spirit of the age in which we live.

## CHAPTER V

### INTERNAL STRIFE

**O**UTSIDE foes may rage, but they cannot really injure the people of God if there be love and harmony within. "Only," writes the apostle, "let your conversation (the conduct) be as it becometh the gospel of Christ; that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; and in nothing terrified by your adversaries: which is to them an evident token of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that of God" (Phil. 1: 27, 28). The contrary is involved in the warning given by James: "Where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work" (James 3: 16). And this Paul also set before the Galatians, when he wrote: "If ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another" (Gal. 5: 15). The sheep of the Lord's flock need to keep close to the Shepherd and to one another if they would be guarded from the prowling wolves who ever seek their destruction. But how sad, and what shame it is when they fall to devouring one another, thus giving place to the devil. Of this we are



warned in the happenings narrated for our instruction in this chapter.

The opening verses are like Acts 6:1: "There was a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brethren the Jews. For there were that said, We, our sons and daughters, are many, and we must procure corn for them that we may eat, and live. Some also there were that said, We have mortgaged our lands, vineyards and houses, that we might buy corn in the dearth. There were also that said, We have borrowed money for the king's tribute, and that upon our lands and vineyards. Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children; and, lo, we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants, and some of our daughters are brought into bondage already; neither is it in our power to redeem them; for other men have our lands and vineyards" (vers. 1-5).

What a pitiable state of affairs is portrayed here by the simple narrative of the complaints of the people against their own brethren! The worst of it all was, that the accusations were true; and the demands of the usurers were, so far as business principles are concerned, such as all nations recognize as legitimate. But God's people were not to be guided by such principles. From the beginning He had told them not to exact usury of their brethren, but rather to make provision for the poor, as giving unto Him. They had all been in poverty once, and He had en-

riched them according to the grace of His heart, not according to their deserts. Alas, how soon had they forgotten this when it came to dealing with one another.

And what sorrows have come upon the children of God in all dispensations because of this very thing! The full manifestation of grace in the present age has not hindered the same mercenary spirit often appearing among those who owe all to the mercy of God. We have already referred to Acts 6; and the conditions prevailing in the assembly at Corinth, long after, were the fruit of a similar state. Brother dragged brother to law, and that before the unjust—men who, whatever their reputation in the world, were not suited to deal with things in the Church. How incongruous are such conditions with the grace of Christianity!

Nor is it only in connection with temporal things that such a spirit has been manifested, but, alas, in fancied zeal for the holy things of God how often has the same evil principle of exaction prevailed. Questions have arisen in Christian assemblies, often of the most perplexing character, concerning which an almost instantaneous judgment has been demanded; and if tried souls and weak gatherings have not been able to bow to the *ipse dixit* of certain carnal leaders, excision or excommunication have been resorted to, in defiance of the word of God and the Spirit of Christ. What is all this but the same thing pre-

vailing in spiritual matters which wrought so much havoc in these temporal affairs?

Oh for more men who, instead of tacitly acquiescing in these unholy conditions, are stirred to a righteous anger by such un-Christlike ways! Nehemiah's upright and unselfish soul was moved to indignation, and with the assurance that came from knowing he sided with God, he rebuked the nobles and the rulers for thus exacting usury of their brethren. The matter was brought up for open consideration in a "great assembly," and the guilt of the leaders charged home upon their consciences before all the people. "We," he says, "after our ability, have redeemed our brethren the Jews, which were sold unto the heathen; and will ye even sell your *brethren*? or shall they be sold unto us?" They were speechless; what answer could they make?

Apply it to conditions such as I have referred to above. Think of the toil and labor that have been expended by devoted servants of Christ to bring lost sinners to His feet. Think of the ministry exercised afterwards to lead on these young converts and establish them in the truth. Think of the pastoral care exercised by earnest, faithful men who knew them as individual members of the flock of Christ—not as a mass without heart or conscience—and then think of the spirit of exaction that can press some test-question on such saints, and ruthlessly cut off and

cast out souls for whose blessing others have labored so persistently — and this by men who profess to act for God and to seek His glory!

Oh, brethren, let us listen to the words of Nehemiah and bow our head in the dust if we have been parties to such unholy ways. "It is *not* good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God because of the heathen our enemies? I likewise, and my brethren, and my servants, might exact of them money and corn: *I pray you, let us leave off this usury.* Restore, I pray you, to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their oliveyards, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money, and of the corn, the wine, and the oil that ye exact of them" (vers. 9-11).

These are suited words for the present solemn time when God has been exercising many as to the very things of which we have been speaking. It is not a time to demand the uttermost farthing of one another, but rather to heed the word, "I pray you, let us leave off this usury." If we have been guilty of robbing any of our brethren of their blood-bought privileges, let us hasten to restore what we can ere the Lord arise as their champion and we be put to shame. For He has said, "Hear the word of the Lord, ye that tremble at His word; Your brethren that hated you, that cast you out for My name's sake, said, Let the Lord be glorified; but He shall appear to *your joy*, and *they* shall be ashamed" (Isa. 66: 5). Cutting and comforting words are these mingled by

the Lord Himself. Oh, for a heart to take heed to them ere it be forever too late!

On the part of the rulers in Judah there was an instant response when the words of Nehemiah had moved them to repentance. "Then said they, We will restore them, and will require nothing of them; so will we do as thou sayest" (ver. 12). And this was sealed with an oath, and further confirmed by a graphic action on the part of the Tirshatha. He shook his lap and said, "So God shake out every man from his house, and from his labor, that performeth not this promise, even thus be he shaken out, and emptied." And this was attested by the solemn "Amen!" of the congregation, who praised the Lord for the mercy shown. It was the same spirit that led the apostle Paul, long afterwards to write: "I would they were even cut off that trouble you!"

In the closing verses, Nehemiah contrasts his own behaviour with that which he had so severely censured. One is again reminded of Paul. It was an occasion where he was compelled to "speak as a fool" that he might close the mouths of any gainsayers. He relates how that from the day of his appointment as governor he had never availed himself of the perquisites of his office, that he might not be burdensome to the people whose blessing he sought.

Former governors had felt free to do this, but the fear of God restrained him from doing the same. Instead, he had kept open house for a

hundred and fifty of the Jews and rulers, besides strangers from the surrounding villages. He was one who had learned that "it is more blessed to give than to receive," and he acted accordingly.

The people might forget all this—alas, too often do; but he cries, "Think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people" (ver. 19). This may seem to savor of self-complacency, but who of us would dare judge so devoted a servant? And again we need to remind ourselves that the dispensation of grace had not yet dawned. Law was still in the ascendant, and the spirit shown by Nehemiah is so beyond his age that we can only give thanks for what God had wrought in the soul of His dear servant, while we pray for wisdom and grace to serve His people in our own generation unselfishly, and in the Spirit of Christ, leaving all question of appreciation or reward to be settled at His judgment-seat.

## CHAPTER VI

### PLOTS AND SNARES

**A** GAIN our attention is directed to the position of Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem (or Gashmu) with the rest of Judah's enemies. Every move within the city was reported to them without, and no doubt they had felt a sense of deep satisfaction when the news of internal strife had reached them. This may account for our having heard nothing of them in the last chapter. If God's people get quarrelling among themselves, the enemy from without can afford to rest in his tents, but as soon as things get right within he actively bestirs himself.

Word having reached the adversaries that the wall was builded and no breach left in it (although the doors had not yet been set up on the gates), Sanballat and Geshem sent an apparently friendly message to Nehemiah, saying, "Come, let us meet together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono" (ver. 2). They would lure him unto neutral ground, outside the wall, as though to confer on matters of importance; but he recognized the evil purpose of their hearts; he inwardly knew their thought was to do him mischief.

His reply is worthy of the man, and should

have a voice for any in our day who are tempted to take neutral ground where the truth of Christ is in question. "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?" He had been entrusted by God with a commission "to restore and build Jerusalem," and he would brook nothing that would for a moment turn him aside from this. A separated man, he would have no part in the surrounding confusion where the word of God was rejected and His people despised. Notice here: it was no question of ministering to, or caring for the children of God scattered abroad that was before him. We may be sure Nehemiah would have been as ready to help the dispersed of Israel as those in Jerusalem. But these Samaritans were the enemies of God's truth, while pretending to serve Him. "They feared the Lord, and served their own gods" (2 Kings 17: 33). They represent, as we have seen, unreal professors, yet presuming to have full title to the name and place of worshipers. With such the faithful servant can have no fellowship. He must maintain and guard what has been committed to him, and if he attempts to mix with these "deceitful workers" he will only lose what he himself has.

Four times Sanballat and Geshem sent to Nehemiah "after this sort," and four times he returned the same answer.

Then they changed their tactics. They had tried



conciliatory methods and failed to corrupt him. Now they would use a scandalous report with intent to intimidate him. There is nothing new under the sun. Satan's wiles are such that the man of God must not be ignorant of his devices.

The fifth time Sanballat sends his servant with "an open letter in his hand." Oh, these "open letters!" How often, while fairly worded, have they been penned only to gender strife. This one contained a covert insinuation to the effect that all Nehemiah's work had been unauthorized, and a direct charge that his object was self-aggrandizement and rebellion against the king. Themselves in rebellion against God, they charge God's servant with their own sin. The "open letter" reads somewhat graciously, but the object of its writer was to occupy the Jews with his apparently gracious spirit in order to poison their minds against Nehemiah. "It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu saith it, that thou and the Jews think to rebel: for which cause thou buildest the wall, that thou mayest be their king, according to these words. And thou hast also appointed prophets to preach of thee at Jerusalem, saying, There is a king in Judah; and now shall it be reported to the king according to these words. Come now, therefore, and let us take counsel together" (vers. 6, 7). Such were the contents of the open letter, and we are not told what impression, if any, it made on the Jews. It was so worded as to intimate that Sanballat's only de-

sire was to clear Nehemiah of the charges whispered about, and yet so cunningly phrased that any disaffected ones within might readily charge the governor with fearing an investigation if he did not go down to confer with Sanballat.

But Nehemiah is not at all concerned about this. He knows he is personally right with God and he fears not suspicion and idle tales. "There are no such things done as thou sayest," he retorts boldly, "but thou feignest them out of thine own heart."

So was it also when evil workers sought to undermine the apostle Paul's influence, and so has it ever been when the truth was hated. To discredit, by fair means or foul, the messenger, is one of Satan's cunning devices in order to discredit the message. To do this, his tools often affect great humility themselves; and pretending to be zealous for the liberty of the people of God, they cry "Pope!" "Diotrephes!" "Heretic!" when any servant of Christ and the Church seeks to stand steadfastly against iniquity, hoping thereby to throw dust in the eyes of simple believers, in order to gain their own unrighteous ends.

Trials like these are not easy to bear. To have one's good evil-spoken of, to be called a "lord over God's heritage" when trying to serve in lowliness, is painful indeed to any sensitive soul. But it is well not to retaliate, nor even to explain, but just to refuse the cowardly charge and leave results with God.

Nehemiah's conscience was free, so he could throw the accusation back upon the man who made it; and knowing it was only done to weaken their hands from the work, he looks heavenward and cries, "Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands" (ver. 9).

But Satan has not yet exhausted his ammunition. A man is found *within the city* to act for Sanballat and Tobiah, upon the payment of a bribe. Shemaiah, the son of Delaiah, is said to have been "shut up." This probably means that he was ill, or confined to his house, and unable to take his place among the workers on the wall. Such a man, if not in fellowship with God as to His then present ways, would prove a ready tool for the conspirators. Nehemiah called upon him, and Shemaiah warned him with pretended sincerity of danger to his life, counselling that he should flee to the temple, there to seek security by hiding in the sanctuary. To do so would have at once spread fear and distrust among the people, and this was just what Sanballat desired.

But God's devoted servant again rose, strong in faith, superior to the situation. "Should such a man as I flee?" he asks, "and who is there, that, being as I am, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in" (ver. 11). To desert the rest and act as though panic-stricken, would ill become one in his position, one who also had confessed his faith in God so boldly. He realized that he was again face to face with evi-

dence of the plots of his enemies, and that God had not sent Shemaiah with such a message, but that he was hired by Tobiah and Sanballat to give this unworthy counsel. With these were others who shared in the conspiracy; one, a prophetess named Noadiah, and several unnamed men, also in the prophetic office. Sad and solemn it is when those who take the place of speaking for God are found in sympathy with the adversaries of His truth, thus hindering the work He has committed to His loyal servants.

Nehemiah, in his customary way, brings the whole matter at once to God, and puts the case in His hands. "My God," he prays, "think Thou upon Tobiah and Sanballat according to these their works, and on the prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets, that would have put me in fear" (ver. 14). It is no longer a matter between Nehemiah and the conspirators but it is now an affair between God and these unholy plotters. And in His own time He can be depended upon to settle all righteously.

At last, despite every effort to frustrate the work, "the wall was finished" in fifty-two days from the time they began to labor. When this was manifest to the surrounding nations "they were much cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God" (ver. 16). With what different feelings would the Jewish remnant contemplate the completed wall! Praise and thanksgiving would well up in

their breasts, that Jerusalem was once more a protected city.

No doubt the enemy hated such "narrow exclusiveness," and would search eagerly for some small breach whereby to force an entrance, or pass in by night. Judah's exclusiveness was their security. So long as the spirit of the people within answered to the strong wall without, they were safe. Their *position* was now clearly defined. The next question was, Would their *condition* answer to it? Alas, the very next verse manifests a bad state. With some at least, the separation was only outward—not of heart and conscience. How often has this been repeated in the history of God's people!

A position may be taken which outwardly is fully in accord with Scripture; yet the heart may not go with it at all. People *talk* of separation, priding themselves on being in a certain ecclesiastical circle, apart from sects of man's devising, while yet in their homes and in business-life going on with the world as though never separated at all. This is of the very essence of Phariseeism—an outward position rigidly maintained, while inwardly corruption holds sway.

Inside the walls of Jerusalem it was far from being in accord with the position taken. "Moreover in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters unto Tobiah, and the letters of Tobiah came unto them. For there were many in Judah sworn unto him, because he was the son-in-law

of Shechaniah the son of Arah; and his son Johanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah. Also they reported his good deeds before me, and uttered my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to put me in fear" (vers. 17-19). It was a complete overturning of divine order. God had said, "The people shall dwell alone, they shall not be reckoned among the nations." And to so abide was to be strong and be under His protecting hand. But the unequal yoke had been entered into. Mixed marriages, despite the bitter lesson in Ezra's day, were still tolerated and excused; and so conscience was broken down and the nobles of Judah lost all power of discrimination. The wall might separate between them and ungodly Tobiah, but there was no separation in spirit, so they easily found means of communication with the haters of God's truth.

To Nehemiah they prated of the good qualities and benevolence of "brother Tobiah," and to the latter they spoke complainingly of the unnecessary strictness of the governor. They were traitors and hinderers, though occupying positions of prominence among the Jews. "Discerning of spirits" is a gift to be coveted; for dullness of sight is becoming increasingly characteristic of many who once were counted upon as able to discern between good and evil.

When the heart goes with the world and worldly religiousness, all kinds of excuses will be made for those who go on with the mixed condition.

Their position and actions—no matter how unscriptural—will be palliated and explained away; while those who truly go on with God will be subjected to the extremes of criticism, and every word and deed viewed as unfavorably as possible. Hence the need of being deeply exercised as to the inward state, as well as carefully walking in the path outlined in the word of God.

The chapter we have been considering is full of warnings for our own times. Happy those who have ears to hear and hearts to understand.

Mere outward separation, with its accompaniment of breaking bread in scriptural simplicity on the first day of each week, will avail for nothing, if there be not heart-detachment from the world and heart-attachment to the Lord Jesus Christ, leading to holiness of life and self-judgment. Only thus can we keep in any measure the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

## CHAPTER VII

### RESTORING ORDER

**T**HE greater part of this chapter from verse 6 to the end, consists of the register of the genealogy, which has already been considered in our study of the book of Ezra (chap. 2), and which we need not again go over here.

This might seem to leave very little that is new for our present concern; but a careful examination of the five opening verses will reveal much on which we may meditate with profit, as being of marked importance at the present serious moment of our history as saints and servants of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ. The more Nehemiah's record is examined, the more it will be seen that every sentence is pregnant with instruction for these closing days of the dispensation of grace. "Written aforetime," they were, nevertheless, "written for our learning;" and we shall be blessed indeed if we carefully appropriate and earnestly practise the lessons they convey to us.

"Now it came to pass, when the wall was built, and I had set up the doors, and the porters and the singers and the Levites were appointed, that I gave my brother Hanani, and Hananiah the



ruler of the palace, charge over Jerusalem; for he was a faithful man, and feared God above many" (vers. 1, 2). There are several matters of moment to occupy us in these two verses. The wall, we have seen, speaks of separation—both *from* the world and its evil, and *to* the Lord, the God of Israel. The gates speak, not of unscriptural exclusion that has no heart for those who are of the one family, but of fellowship, admitting to the privileges to be enjoyed within the walls all who have divine title to enter, and barring out all others. And this suggests the importance of Nehemiah's appointment of *porters*, or gate-keepers. He was not indifferent as to who came or went. The business of the porters was to act as watchmen of the gates, permitting only such to come inside as could give evidence of their right so to do.

In applying this to the ordering of the Christian assembly, it is easy to see what an important place the porter occupies. Suppose a company of believers, gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, in separation from worldly and ecclesiastical evil: how long will its purity and holy character be maintained if people are allowed to come and go as they will without true, godly care as to their new birth, their behavior, the doctrines that they bring, or the associations they go on with? Hence the need of the sometimes unpleasant service of the porter.

I do not mean that certain ones should be ap-

pointed as inquisitors of those applying for fellowship; rather, that all should be duly exercised before God as to who are received to the holy and exalted privileges of Christian fellowship. In the breaking and eating of the loaf, and the drinking of the cup, we not only set forth the Lord's death, and fellowship with Him who thus gave Himself for us, but we thereby manifest our communion or fellowship with those participating with us in this solemn observance. And how can there be fellowship if there be not confidence and unity? 'Therefore the folly of declaring that, "We examine no one: each must judge himself: none are accountable to others."

Such principles are subversive of Christian communion. We are called upon to discern those who, with us, partake at the table of the Lord. "If any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolator, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner, with such an one" we are commanded "not to eat" (1 Cor. 5: 11). But must we not then examine those called brothers if we are to be obedient to this scripture? And again, "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine" (*i. e.*, the doctrine of Christ), we are told to "receive him not into your house, nor greet him, for he that greeteth him is partaker of his evil deeds" (2 John 10, 11, N.T.). But if the gates be left wide open, and the porter asleep, or off duty, who shall hinder persons—either themselves bringing the evil teaching, or contaminated by

known association with it—forcing their way in, to the defilement of the whole company? Hence the need of godly care in receiving to Christian fellowship.

It is sometimes said, "We receive all who are Christ's." But do any really mean this? Who dares pronounce as to those who are Christ's? "The Lord knoweth them that are His" (2 Tim. 2: 19). We make a great mistake when we attempt to give oracular decisions as to so momentous a matter. We are only called upon to examine the profession, the life, the doctrine, and, as a matter of course, the associations of the applicant for fellowship. Even then, when all due care has been exercised, a self-deceived one, or a deceiver, may be unwittingly permitted to creep in (Jude 4), to cause serious trouble later; but if there were no porter-service at all, who can conceive the state of things that would soon exist! The world itself is not so foolish as to leave its ports of entry unguarded. It is certainly far easier to allow any who desire to come in unchallenged; but it is neither for their blessing nor the peace of the assembly, not to speak of the glory of the Lord. So it would have been easier in Nehemiah's day to have opened the gates at dawn and left them open till nightfall, with no watchful porter to question persons desiring to enter; but in that case how much of the work we have been considering would have gone for nothing!

The porter at the gate was therefore a person

of great importance in Jerusalem, and only discreet and cautious men should have performed this service. And what answers to this in the Christian assembly is the exercise of godly, thoughtful care as to who are permitted to share in the holy things committed to the people of God. Fellowship is worth too much to be frittered away by mere sentimentality. It has been said, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty"—and we might say it of Christian fellowship also, which is soon dissipated if the porter's service is overlooked.

The second order established by Nehemiah was that of the *singers*. And they too may give occasion for fruitful meditation. The spirit of praise is the spirit of power. A rejoicing assembly will be one where God is free to work, and will become a channel of blessing to those without. In Israel the singers were a distinct company, separated from the body of the people. But the New Testament contemplates no such incongruity as a choir—surpliced or otherwise—to lead the praises of the assembly. The Lord Jesus Himself is the Leader, and all believers are exhorted to "sing with the spirit and with the understanding also." "Speaking to yourselves in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart unto the Lord; giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. 5: 19, 20). "Let the word of Christ dwell

in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another; in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts unto the Lord" (Col. 3:16). In these verses we have clearly set forth the singers, the song, and the accompaniment. All believers are the choristers. The accompaniment is not the grand pipe organ or the delightful orchestra, but something sweeter far in the ears of God—the melody that rises from a heart filled with His grace.

We may distinguish psalms from hymns. The former would more properly be expressions of praise. To praise is to psalm. (See Ps. 105:2, *margin*). A hymn is rather an ascription of the perfections of Deity; it expresses the highest point of worship, magnifying God, not because of His works in our behalf, but of His matchless perfections. A spiritual song would be different from either of these. It might be a recital of God's ways or of the believer's experience.\*

When gathered in assembly we come together as singers. There the Lord takes His place in the midst to lead our worship and praise, as it is written, "In the midst of the assembly will I sing praise unto Thee" (Heb. 2:12). Thus, as occupied with Him, His death and the fruit resulting therefrom, praise well becomes each saint.

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\* Those who are accustomed to the "Little Flock Hymn Book" might see in No. 235 a typical psalm; in No. 150, an almost matchless hymn; while No. 139 is a good example of a spiritual song.

This is not to legislate against every other spiritual exercise, but it is surely what is characteristic.

And now we turn to consider the third class mentioned in the first verse. These are the Levites, or ministering servants of God. Of old one tribe alone were Levites. But in this dispensation, just as all gathered saints have porter-responsibility upon them, and all are to be singers, so all are servants. "To every man his work" is the Lord's word for each. But Levite-service may also speak of public ministry, and this of course is not general, but a special responsibility placed upon those who have been gifted accordingly—yea, who are themselves gifts given to the assembly for the edification of the body of Christ.

Such service must be exercised in direct responsibility to the Lord. The Church does not appoint ministers of the Word. Christ as Head alone appoints, and by the Spirit qualifies. The Church tests those who come as ministers by the message they bring, comparing it with the word of God. If it be according to what is there revealed it must be accepted. If contrary to the teaching of Scripture, both teacher and doctrine are to be refused.

There is room in every scripturally-gathered company of saints for all divinely-given ministry. The true Levite will find a welcome there. But, after all is said and done, there is no infallible court on earth that can decide whether or no a man is a gift to the assembly. The only rule is

that of Prov. 18: 16: "A man's gift maketh room for him." Hence, if one fancies he is called to expound the Word, and his ministry is not appreciated, he need not abuse the saints, but should rather consider that among them at least his gift has not made room. He may be a minister to others, but not to them. If assured of his divine call, let him patiently go elsewhere; but let him also carefully consider whether he may not be boasting himself of a false gift, and so cause shame at last, because of the emptiness of his ministry (Prov. 25: 14). To serve as a Levite in this special sense, one must be in living touch with God, speaking from a full heart of what has stirred his own soul; otherwise his ministry will be barren and profitless. We shall see the Levites doing their God-appointed service in the interesting scenes of the next chapter.

In the second verse now before us we read of two men placed over Jerusalem. We may be assured it was not nepotism that led Nehemiah to appoint his own brother Hanani as one of these. To have done this because of relationship would have been most offensive. On the other hand relationship must not hinder when spiritual qualification is evident. Of Hananiah, his coadjutor in this service, it is said that "he was a faithful man, and one that feared God above many." Blessed words of commendation are these! Would that they might be rightfully applied to many more of us! What honor could be greater than to be

designated faithful by the Lord Himself on His judgment-seat.

These last-mentioned men had authority over the porters, and to them Nehemiah commands: "Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun be hot; and while they stand by, let them shut the doors, and bar them; and appoint watches of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, every one in his watch, and every one over against his house" (ver. 3).

Two things concern us here. First:—Entrance into the city was to be in broad daylight. People were not to be permitted to slip in, in the dark. This may have a voice for us. Let all assembly matters especially as concerning reception and excision be open and above-board: nothing underhanded or hidden should be tolerated. Second:—Watchfulness was still required of all. It was not enough to have official porters. All were to be watchmen for the good of all. "What I say unto you, I say unto all: Watch!" As long as we have anything to maintain for God down here we need to be on the watch—never off guard for a moment, lest our wily foe introduce what will cause lasting sorrow and disaster.

The city was large and great, we are told—that is, the space enclosed by the walls; but the people were few, and the houses were not builded. The wall enclosed all that had originally been marked off as the city of God. But the remnant were feeble, and care would be needed to main-



tain the place taken. In view of giving each one his proper portion Nehemiah now investigates the registry made when the first company came up. It was no new work he was engaged in. He is but carrying on what had been commenced some years before. The original record is therefore examined, and all ratified by the governor. As we have already gone over this register we need only refer the reader to the remarks made in the notes on the 2nd chapter of Ezra.

Its appearance here shows how completely Nehemiah had identified himself with the work which the Spirit of God had wrought through Zerubbabel and Joshua. He was one with them, and together they sought the glory of the God of Israel. Let this have a voice for all who have ears to hear.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE GREAT BIBLE-READING

**I**N every genuine revival among God's people the revealed Word of the Lord has had a large place. It was so in Josiah's day, and in the awakening under Hezekiah. It has been so throughout the Church period. It was the recovery of the Word that brought about the Reformation of the 16th century, and every true awakening since has been based upon Bible study and Bible practice. Of no spiritual movement in history could this more truthfully be said than of that special work of God which began almost simultaneously in many parts of Great Britain and Ireland in the first half of the 19th century. Here and there little companies of devoted believers were found gathering together to search the Scriptures, seeking a right way for themselves and their children in the midst of the existing ecclesiastical confusion and dead formality. To them was revealed from the Word that Christ Jesus is the one Centre of gathering, that the Church is one body in which the Holy Spirit dwells and which He is to guide. Thus disowning everything for which they could find neither a plain "Thus saith the Lord" nor a simple divine principle exemplified in Scripture, they turned away from all sects and systems to

be known only as brethren in Christ, members of His body, seeking to walk in subjection to the Holy Spirit. For such, these remnant books are full of important and much-needed instruction. They have failed—failed grievously and openly—as did the restored Jews of old; but the same resource remains for these as for those—the abiding, unerring word of God. And it is this that is so strikingly set forth in our chapter. There are seven things here brought to our notice, and I desire to write of them in order.

First, it is a united people waiting on God. This is what verse 1 suggests. “All the people gathered themselves together as one man into the open place that was before the Water Gate.” We have already observed that the Water Gate intimates something of the cleansing, refreshing, reviving power of the word of God. What more fitting place for a company of people to be in who are seeking divine instruction than “the open place before the Water Gate?” Depend upon it, God will never disappoint His saints when thus before Him. Of old He said to Moses, “Gather the people *together*, and I will give them water” (Num. 21: 16). And in a higher sense will that word ever be fulfilled when His people are with one mind and one heart gathered together to learn His will from His all-sufficient Word.

In the second place we hear the cry, “Bring the Book!” Verse 1 goes on to say, “And they spake unto Ezra the scribe to *bring the book of*

the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded to Israel." People may sneer and call this *bibliolatry* if they will. Worship of the book it is *not*. It is rather the acknowledgement that the Author of the Book is the all-wise and all-sufficient One who has so given His Word as to make it a safe guide in every time of confusion. What was it that freed the people of the Lord in the middle ages and overthrew the power of Rome? It was the response to this same cry, "Bring the Book!" And whenever or wherever God's children are thus ready to hear His Word and do it, there must be blessing and divine illumination.

Mark, they did not seek Ezra's opinion, nor the ideas of Nehemiah, nor yet those of Zerubbabel. They honored these servants of God, and rightfully so; they would have despised the Master if they had not revered His sent ones; but the servants were to be ministers of the Word—not of science or philosophy, nor yet of theology—but of the word of the living God; hence the cry, "Bring the Book!"

It is a grievous thing when merely human writings or words are put upon a level with the Book of books. One dreads the use often made of esteemed brethren's writings. Something is called in question, and at once there is a great effort made to show that Mr. So-and-So taught thus, or Mr. Somebody else has written this or the other. In this way the authority of the word

of God is weakened in men's souls, and people are content if they think they hold what Mr. A. or Mr. B. held, even though they are quite unable to find authority for it in the book of God. This is a snare of which we need to be watchful lest we find ourselves once more teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

Thirdly, we learn that when Ezra brought the book, "He read therein before the street that was before the Water Gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law" (ver. 3). This is most blessed—an attentive people solemnized by the word of God. So great was the company that a pulpit of wood was erected for Ezra, and on his right and left were companies of devoted Levites waiting to hear the Word and explain it to the people. It was a day when books were not easily multiplied. Perhaps Ezra had the only Bible there was in all the land; but in the manner indicated it was made the common property of all the people.

Subjection to the Word is the fourth point that comes prominently before us in verses 5 to 8. "Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people (for he was above all the people); and when he opened it, all the people stood up: and Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands; and they bowed their heads, and wor-

shipped the Lord with their faces to the ground." Who that has any conscience at all can fail to be touched by the reverence thus shown for the word of God? Such a Bible-reading was no free and easy, carnal coming together to argue over certain doctrines or debate intricate questions to the bewilderment of the simple, and the spiritual harm of the more advanced. Neither was it a place for some leader to shine, and to have his interpretations received without question as the mind of the Lord. This great Bible-reading was marked by a holy subjection to God and a hallowed reverence for His Word that contrasts strikingly with modern flippancy and irreverence in handling holy things.

To minister the Word to such a company must have been both a great joy and a solemn responsibility for Ezra and the Levites as they "caused the people to understand the law, and the people stood in their place. So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading" (vers. 7, 8). It needs to be borne in mind that, after the captivity, Hebrew, as a spoken language, had largely been displaced by Aramaic, hence the need of carefully explaining the Hebrew words to the waiting people.

Fifthly, the word of God as a source of joy and refreshment. This is what is suggested in the next section, verses 9 to 12: "And Nehemiah, that is the Tirshatha [or, governor], and Ezra

the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the Lord your God: mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law." Their awakened consciences told them how guilty they and their fathers had been in refusing to obey the word of God; but their tears of penitence testified to the self-judgment that was going on; and, with God, sin judged is sin put away. Hence the cheering words of verse 10. "Then he said unto them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength." God loves to surround Himself with a holy, happy people; but the two things of necessity go together. Holiness and happiness are inseparable. Who can fail to see in what is here before us a striking picture, often fulfilled, when God has visited His people in giving them bread? Refreshed and edified themselves, they become channels of blessing to others, sharing gladly with those "for whom nothing is prepared."

"So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy, neither be ye grieved. And all the people went their way to eat and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them" (vers. 11, 12). How much deeper the joy to-day, in the

light of a full gospel, when saints gather about a risen Christ, and His word is brought home to each heart in the Spirit's power, leading to similar exercises and lifting-up before God.

It is of *obedience* to the Word that the sixth section speaks. On the second day the chiefs of the people came together again, and the reading of the Word was continued. On this occasion a notable discovery was made: "They found written...that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month" (ver. 14). Now this was at once recognized as a challenge to obedience. Here was something which had been *unobserved for a thousand years*—and still it was in the Book! Verse 17 shows us that in the palmiest days of David and Solomon no attention had been paid to this particular precept. "Since the days of Joshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so." To obey it required considerable inconvenience; they might have argued that what Samuel, David, Solomon and others had overlooked was surely non-essential; but "they found it written," and that settled it for an obedient people. So the whole company went out to the mountains, and brought olive, pine, myrtle and palm branches and made booths, "as it is written," and in these they dwelt, thus calling to mind the days of God's care for His pilgrim people in the wilderness: "And there was very great gladness." What a



lovely example of unquestioning obedience to the Word!

And so we come to the seventh thought, in closing our somewhat rapid survey of the chapter: The word of God is all-sufficient for every experience of life. "Also day by day, from the first day unto the last day, he read in the book of the law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, according to the manner" (ver. 18). Those seven days looked on to the Kingdom, when the Lord shall be surrounded by a happy, redeemed people, the *eighth* day bringing an outlook into eternity. Throughout Time the word of God contains all His people need for spiritual food and daily guidance.

Oh, for grace ever to hide that Word in our hearts, thus to be kept from sin, and to have our steps ordered accordingly, and every thought brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ!

## CHAPTER IX

### THE WORD AND PRAYER

**T**HE relations of the word of God and prayer come out vividly in this portion. The seven days' ministry of the Word had had a most blessed effect so that "in the twenty and fourth day of this month (the same month that was ushered in by the great Bible-reading) the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sack-clothes, and earth upon them. And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place, and read in the book of the law of the Lord their God one fourth part of the day; and another fourth part they confessed, and worshiped the Lord their God" (vers. 1-3).

The order here is most instructive. It was *first* the Word, then prayer, confession, and worship. The Word had been having its effect in a wonderfully real way since the seven days' feast. What that Word judged, they had been judging. What that Word commanded they had sought to do. Hence we have as a result the remnant reaching what was probably the highest moral state they ever occupied from the Babylonian captivity to the coming of Messiah. Their separation was complete. "They separated themselves from *all*

strangers." It was now for the first time that position and condition seemed to coalesce.

And so they come together again desiring to learn more of the mind of God that it might lead to increased devotedness. So the Bible-reading is again prominent. The first quarter of the day is spent in hearing the Word. Then the next quarter is given up to prayer: "They confessed and worshiped the Lord their God." It is unwise, and may be hurtful, to reverse this order. The Word and prayer should ever go together—but it should be the Word first; then prayer follows intelligently. The believer should be a man holding the even balance of learning from the Word and cultivating the spirit of prayer. We need to hear God speaking to us that we may speak rightly to God.

One who gives himself pre-eminently to the Word, neglecting prayer, will become heady and doctrinal—likely to quarrel about "points," and be occupied with theoretical Christianity to the hurt of his soul and the irritation of his brethren. On the other hand, one who gives himself much to prayer while neglecting the Word is likely to become exceedingly introspective, mystical, and sometimes fanatical. But he who reads the word of God reverently and humbly, seeking to know the will of God, and then gives himself to prayer, confessing and judging what the Scriptures have condemned in his ways, and words, and thoughts, will have his soul drawn out in worship also, and

thus grow both in grace and in knowledge, becoming a well-rounded follower of Christ. Apart from a knowledge of the Word, prayer will lack exceedingly in intelligence; for the objective must ever precede the subjective, but not be divorced therefrom.

Here, in Nehemiah 9 (which as we have elsewhere noticed is linked, in confession, with Daniel 9 and Ezra 9), the Levites lead the people in their prayer and praise, standing "on the stairs," as though going up to the heavenly sanctuary. And in the prayer that follows—the longest in the Bible (Solomon's dedicatory prayer being considerably shorter)—there is much blessed instruction as we listen to the rehearsal of God's ways with their fathers and the confession of their own failure and sin.

The opening words remind us of the beginning of what is generally called the Lord's prayer—and of what should occupy a pre-eminent place in *all prayer*—"Hallowed be Thy Name." The Levites called on all the people to stand up and bless the Eternal One, their God, whose glorious name is exalted above all blessing and praise. To Him alone creation is ascribed and, as though testifying against the idolatry all about them that led the nations to worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator, they acknowledge that "all the host of heaven worship Him." He it was who had chosen Abram, bringing him out of the Chaldees, making him in very deed to

answer to his new name Abraham—"the father of a multitude." To him the promise of the land of Canaan was given which in due course was fulfilled in his seed—multitudinous as the sand of the sea, brought out of Egyptian bondage, led through the sea and the wilderness by the cloudy pillar, first to the mount of God and then to the land of promise (vers. 4-12). The Levites celebrated the giving of the law at Sinai; and it is of moment to notice that they declare it was then—and not before—that the holy Sabbath was made known to them (ver. 14). This would seem conclusive evidence that whereas God sanctified the seventh day at the completion of His work, as recorded in the second chapter of Genesis, He did not give it to man by command until He had a redeemed people gathered about Himself in the wilderness. It was a sign, or reminder, not alone of God's rest after the creative days, but of the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage, and the pledge of a rest yet to come.

After celebrating the mighty acts of the Lord, the Levites go on to confess the fearful breakdown of the people, and that from the very first. Their fathers dealt proudly, and in place of recognizing their dependence on this mighty Deliverer who had wrought so wondrously on their behalf, they hardened their necks and harkened not to His commandments—in their rebellion desiring even to return to the very land of bondage from which He had taken them. Their wilderness his-

tory was a most humbling record, full of evidences of their folly, and yet abounding with testimonies of Jehovah's faithfulness, who sustained them through all those forty years "so that they lacked nothing; their clothes waxed not old, and their feet swelled not" (vers. 13-21). And when at last they reached the land given by covenant to Abraham, the nations therein were rooted out before them and they themselves planted in their place; there they multiplied and grew, rejoicing in the abundance of the fruitful fields of Canaan, and delighting themselves in the great goodness of their covenant-keeping God (vers. 22-25).

But disobedience and rebellion characterized them almost from the days of Joshua, and God's holy law they cast behind their back, despising His precepts and slaying His prophets, when such were sent to show them their sin and call them back to subjection to His word. When, in their distresses, they cried to Him He granted them deliverance—not for their deserts, but for His own name's sake, according to His mercies; thus again and again manifesting His tender love and care.

Yet scarcely had He interposed on their behalf than they turned aside as before, sinning against His judgments (that is, the testimonies rendered), "which if a man do he shall live in them," thus fighting against His Holy Spirit who spake in the prophets; until, at last, the kings of Assyria and Babylonia were permitted to root them out of

their inheritance, carrying them captive to the land of the stranger.

The Levites own the justice of all God's dealings with the nation. "Thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly," is their humble acknowledgment. And they go on to confess how their kings, princes, priests and fathers had not kept the law, nor harkened to His commandments, nor turned from their wicked works; and so they remained bondmen to that very day, subject to the kings of Persia; even though a little reviving had been granted them, and they had been gathered once more at God's centre. Now, bearing in mind all the evil consequences of disobedience in the past, they made a "sure covenant" (alas, again to be soon broken!) and, putting it in writing, signed and sealed it; pledging themselves to cleave to the Lord, to separate from all strangers, and faithfully to do His will (vers. 33-38).

That they were truly in earnest none can doubt, but the future would show once more, as the past so often had done, that man is not to be trusted, and that were God's covenant based on human faithfulness, instead of divine grace, all hope for man's lasting blessing would be vain.

Yet it is well to have such seasons of exercise as this which we have been contemplating. Undoubtedly, it was for many a step forward, which they never retraced, although for the nation, as such, there could be no full restoration till the advent of God's Anointed.

## CHAPTER X

### THE NEW START

**I**T is both true and false (according to the thought one has in mind) that God never restores a failed testimony. If by this expression, frequently heard at the present time, it be meant that failure having once blighted a movement that originally was of God, it will never again reach its pristine glory, the statement is undoubtedly true. But if it be meant that, ruin having come in, God will not answer the cry of repentance with revival and restoration when His face is earnestly sought, it is utterly false. It is to be feared that it is spiritual lethargy and an unwillingness to bestir oneself and seriously face existing conditions, which are the real causes why many once gathered to the name of Jesus now go on in isolation, blaming the divisions and lack of spirituality evidenced by others as the reason for their having left the path of subjection to God's revealed will as to the corporate testimony of His people.

To such, what we have just been considering ought to speak loudly. Things had got indeed very low among the remnant. Their actual condition had become most dishonoring to God. Nevertheless their position was a right one, and



nothing could be gained by forsaking it. The important thing was to remain where they were, and seek to put away all that hindered their enjoyment of the Lord's favor, that thus their state individually and corporately might be approved of Him.

So we have seen them turning unitedly to the Word, earnestly inquiring as to what God had said, and when "they found it written," acting upon it, though it meant, as in many instances it did, bitter sorrow and painful humiliation.

Having pledged themselves (in accord with the spirit of the legal dispensation) to put away all strangers and to walk obediently before God, they drew up a written declaration, signing and sealing it, from Nehemiah the Governor down to the lowest in rank of the common people, "all they that had separated themselves from the people of the lands unto the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, every one having knowledge, and having understanding" (vers. 1-28).

It was a serious, solemn and definite thing they had undertaken, and it would require purpose of heart to carry it out. "They clave to their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of Jehovah our Lord, and His judgments and His statutes; and that we would not give our daughters unto

the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons: and if the peoples of the land bring ware or any victuals on the Sabbath day to sell, that we would not buy it of them on the Sabbath, or on the holy day: and that we would leave the seventh year, and the exaction of every debt" (vers. 29-31).

Notice carefully what it was they had covenanted to do—

First: To walk in God's law; or, in other words, to be subject to the Holy Scriptures. Second (and of course all that followed was involved in the first): To maintain separation from the peoples of the land that there be no unequal yoke. Third: To honor God by a careful observance of the Sabbath day, not permitting greed or lust for strangers' dainties to lead them to violate its sacredness. Fourth: To let the land lie fallow every seventh year, for disobedience to which command they had of old been carried to Babylon, while for seventy years the land kept Sabbath. Fifth: To deal graciously with each other as brethren, leaving the exaction of every debt, not acting in the spirit of the usurer.

Are there not weighty lessons for us in these pledges? I mean for those who have sought to give Christ His place as Head, and to act on the truth of the oneness of the body of Christ, but who have so miserably failed to keep the Spirit's unity in the bond of peace. Wherein have we missed our way? Has it not been in what is

here set forth in Old Testament language? Must we not confess that we have not been obedient to the word of our God? We prided ourselves on having taken a right position—directed thereto by the Word—but we have not been careful to be individually subject to that Word. Is it not a fact that to many the “voice of the assembly” has been louder than the voice of God in Holy Scripture? Is it not a fact that the traditions of the elders have, in critical times, been more relied on than “Thus saith the Lord?” Is it not time then that, as individuals and as gathered companies of saints, we go back to the simplicity of early days, and seek to be guided henceforth alone by the word of the Lord which abideth forever?

And have we not, likewise, greatly missed the truth of separation? Have we not often been quite satisfied in that we were separated ecclesiastically from the world-church, while socially and in our business relations we were linked up with the world to an even greater extent than many not outwardly separated as we? Has not the spirit of the world come into our homes and assemblies? Is it not manifest in the books we enjoy, the clothing we wear, the company we frequent, the language we use? What is mere ecclesiastical separation if we are otherwise so much linked with the world?

And is it not true that, when we have been somewhat aroused as to this, we have enjoined strictest separation from saints often more godly

than ourselves, instead of from the spirit of the present age of evil? Has it not often happened that saints of God have been passed by or coldly greeted because of some difference in judgment as to a disciplinary question difficult to determine righteously, while utter worldlings have been given every evidence of affection? These are serious questions that had better be faced now than at the judgment-seat of Christ.

We know that, as we are not under law but under grace, the Sabbath of a past dispensation is now for us fulfilled in Christ, but are we then giving Christ His place, and not permitting our greed for gain or our lust after earth's pleasant things to break in upon that Sabbath-rest we should ever enjoy in Him? Can our business affairs always bear the test of His eyes that are as a flame of fire? Have we one weight for testing sacred things and another for what we call secular affairs? May there not be cause for exercise as to these matters? And may it not be that right here is one reason for our leanness?

And what of the seventh year? It was this "leaving the seventh year" that really showed that Israel were a people confiding in the living God. "To live by faith" is often spoken of as though it were the calling or prerogative of those separated to the ministry of the Word. But are not *all* believers called to live by faith—to hold things here with a loose grasp, but lay hold on eternal life as the one thing needful? And have

we been largely forgetting this, and contenting ourselves with "gathering on divine ground," "scripturally breaking bread," "maintaining the testimony," and all the rest of what is merely outward and ecclesiastical, while losing our grip on eternal realities and living as though this world were by far the more important of the two? Is it any wonder then that when matters arise among us calling for the exercise of spiritual discernment and godly judgment we are found wanting, and what should be for the unifying of the saints becomes the means of their scattering?

And this brings us to the fifth pledge: What about the exaction of every debt? Have we not been hard and exacting and over-much righteous with one another, alienating those we ought to have drawn with cords of love, and demanding of each other what subjects of grace should be ashamed to press? Surely, as before intimated, it is high time to "leave off this usury."

The end of the dispensation is fast approaching. The Judge is standing at the door. The Lord is looking on, close at hand. The word of God is being given up and its truth denied on every hand. It is high time that those who love that Word cease their exactions one of another, and all alike judging everything that has hindered fellowship, put away for ever the evil things that have wrought such havoc, and so stand shoulder to shoulder, heart to heart, and hand in hand, for God and His truth with all who seek to be loyal

to Him and His Word in the little time that remains ere "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together unto Him."

On the rest of the chapter I have few remarks to offer. Judging the evil, the remnant sought, so far as they might, to put things in order in regard to providing for and maintaining the service of the house of God, giving of their first-fruits and tithes that there might be abundance to carry on the ministry and to support the ministers. Depend upon it, if the Lord's people get right individually, that which is corporate will flourish, and there will be abundant provision for maintaining a visible testimony. Lack of spirituality closes up hearts and purses. Godliness opens both. The poverty of the people was no barrier when their consciences were in exercise, and they determined "not to forsake the house of their God" (vers. 32-39). And so will it ever be where the love of Christ reigns.

Apart from this all must degenerate more and more until all testimony for God is gone. One who knew and suffered much as standing for "the present truth" left behind seasonable words of warning with which I bring this portion to a close.

"What is important is not 'The Brethren,' but the truth they have... God could set them aside, and spread His truth by others—would, I believe, though full of gracious patience, if they be not faithful. Their place is to remain in obscurity and devotedness, not to think

of Brethren (it is always wrong to think of ourselves), but of souls, in Christ's name and love, and of His glory.

"Let them walk in love, in the truth, humble, as little (and content to be little) as when they began, and God will bless them. If not, their candlestick may go as that of others—and oh, what sorrow and confusion of face it would be after such grace!...

"As regards also the activity outside them, it is one of the signs of the times, and they should rejoice in it ...But it does not give their testimony at all...I do not believe attacks on anything to be our path. Self-defence is every way to be avoided. The Lord will answer for us if we do His will...God has no need of us, but He has need of a people who walk in the truth, in love, and holiness. 'I will leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of Jehovah' (Zeph. 3:12).

"The gospel we may, and must, rejoice in; yet it only makes the testimony of Brethren outside the camp more necessary than ever; but it must be real...If brethren fall in with the current Christianity inside the camp, they would be but another sect with certain truths"—  
*J. N. D.*

In the light of much that has transpired one can almost hear the voice of prophecy in such words. Beloved brethren, let us one and all heed their serious message.

## CHAPTER XI

### A WILLING PEOPLE

THE Bridegroom in the Canticles says: "I went down into the garden of nuts to see the fruits of the valley, and to see whether the vine flourished, and the pomegranates budded. Or ever I was aware, my soul set me among the chariots of my willing people" (Song 6: 11, 12; 1911 *Version*); and in psalm 110: 3 we read, "Thy people shall be willing (or, a free-will offering) in the day of Thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: thou hast the dew of thy youth."

Words like these form a fitting introduction to the chapter now soliciting our thoughtful consideration—a passage that seems to be filled only with hard names and meagre details if the important truth be passed over that it is God's own inspired honor-roll, never to be forgotten, of His willing people. Then indeed we recognize in it such a delightful valley as that described in the Song, where the vine is flourishing and the fragrant pomegranates budding for the delectation of Him who rejoices to dwell among His willing-hearted saints—made willing by His power working among them, manifested in holiness of heart and life, engendered and refreshed by the precious dews of the Holy Spirit.



A free-will offering was made, not now of money or other means, but of men devoted to the Lord, to dwell in Jerusalem, that the holy city might be furnished and defended. "And the rulers of the people dwelt at Jerusalem: the rest of the people also cast lots, to bring one of ten to dwell in Jerusalem the holy city, and nine parts to dwell in other cities. And the people blessed all the men that willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem" (vers. 1, 2). As before they had tithed their produce and possessions, so now they tithed themselves. But it was not conscription; for each one chosen responded with a free heart, glad thus to be especially linked with the defence and up-building of the city of the Name. They loved the place where God's honor dwelt, and they were pleased to be at home there.

Of old, in the wilderness, it was the "willing-hearted and the wise-hearted" who built the sanctuary of the Lord; and may we not say that the willing-hearted *are* the wise-hearted? For surely it is the evidence of wisdom abiding in the heart when the whole life is freely devoted to the service of the Lord. And so when the evil had been put away from among the remnant of the Jews, and the interests of Jehovah had been made paramount to every other interest it was the free and loyal service of His willing people that gave joy to the heart of God.

To most of us, perhaps, the details that follow in the balance of the chapter can, in the very

nature of things, possess very little interest. It is a mere tabulation of families and individuals whose names to us are often well-nigh unpronounceable, and usually, forgotten almost as soon as read. But in the sight of God it is a tabulation of great importance, and, like other lists we have noticed in these post-captivity books, will be consulted at the judgment-seat of Christ. For these willing offerers shall then learn how good was their choice when they accepted loss in this world that they might the better care for the city of God's choice. Very little is said of these members of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (vers. 4-9), and of Levi also who dwelt in Jerusalem (vers. 10-18), but every one is well known to the Lord, and every word and act that told their devotedness of heart to Himself will be manifested in that day. And, even now, where scholarship enables one to read something of the significance of these names, there are doubtless helpful lessons which for the present most of us fail to see.

The porters and servants (the "Nethinim"), yea, and the singers too—true sons of Asaph set "over the business of the house of God" who had their special portion by the king's commandment (vers. 19-23)—will all be called by name when Messiah sits upon His throne to reward every one who in every dispensation had respect unto the coming recompense. For it was just as truly a service for some to till the fields and dwell in the restored villages, thus holding all the land for

God, so far as strength and numbers permitted, as it was for their willing-hearted brethren to abide in the city of the coming King (vers. 25-36). He valued all according to the intention of the heart, and He does the same to-day.

We would not therefore pass carelessly over what some might call so "dry" a chapter as this, but reading it thoughtfully and prayerfully let us challenge our own hearts as to how far we have been and are now characterized by the spirit of willing, joyous obedience to all that God has been pleased to make known to us concerning His holy desires. Words need not be multiplied on such a theme; but exercise may well be real and deep, lest in that day, when the record of *our* service is opened on high, there be only a blotted story of slothful, almost forced obedience, contrasting unfavorably indeed with the willing offering of these men of old.

In view of this may we be stirred up to heed the Christian poet's words:

"Go on; go on; there's all eternity to rest in,  
And far too few are on the *active service list*;  
No labor for the Lord is risky to invest in;  
But nothing will make up should His 'Well  
done' be missed."

## CHAPTER XII

### THE DEDICATION OF THE WALL

**I**T will be remembered that in the duplicate lists of those who first came up to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest (or Jeshua, as he is here called), the families only of the priests were mentioned, not the names of the chief priests themselves. That lack is supplied in the opening verses of the present chapter (vers. 1-7). God would have these men in everlasting remembrance, who so efficiently fulfilled their service with true-hearted devotion. The chief of the Levites are also mentioned, though of these we have read before in chapters 8:7 and 9:4, 5. A later generation of priests, serving doubtless in the latter days of Nehemiah, is given in verses 12 to 21, the sons of those referred to above, faithful men walking in their fathers' footsteps, and ensamples to the people.

But in the intervening verses (10 and 11) we have a short genealogical list carrying down the line of Jeshua for five generations to Jaddua, the great and justly-celebrated high priest who held this supreme office in the days when the Persian dominion was overthrown by Alexander the Great.

There can, I think, be no question as to this table having been added by a later hand, which the Holy Spirit was pleased to use to preserve the record of Jaddua's descent. Verse 22 must have been added at the same time, declaring that a faithful record of the heads of the Levites had been kept to the days of Darius the Persian, whom I take to be Darius Codomanus, overthrown by the great Macedonian conqueror. It is possible indeed that the book of Malachi may have been written about that time, and that he may have added to the list, or the list itself. His solemn message shows us the sad condition into which the children of the remnant degenerated after the fathers had died.

Simple souls will not be confused or perplexed at the suggestion we have made above, if they bear in mind that the entire Old Testament was in the hands of the Jewish doctors in the days of our Lord's sojourn upon earth, and that concerning it all He declared, "The Scripture cannot be broken." It is not necessary therefore to know in each instance the human author of a book or part of a book. We know that "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost," and thus we have in every part a "God-breathed" record, and that is enough.

It is evident from the next table (vers. 23-26) that both Nehemiah and Ezra lived through "the days of Joiakim the son of Jeshua," as well as in the days of the father, who accompanied Zerubabel in the first emigration from Babylon. Dur-

ing their life-time the people clung to the word of God, and, with occasional individual lapses, such as we read of in the next chapter, maintained, on the whole, a testimony for the Lord who had brought them back, though in feebleness, to the place where He had set His name. Of the chief of the Levites (ver. 24) it is distinctly said that they were appointed both "to praise and to give thanks, according to the commandment of David the man of God, ward over against ward." The temple might be poor indeed as compared with Solomon's building, "exceeding magnificent," and the people themselves a small and afflicted remnant, but they sought to act on the divine instruction as to the service of the house of God which had been communicated by David to Solomon at the beginning. Likewise, whatever the feebleness to-day, it is the part of faithfulness to go back to "that which was from the beginning," and to endeavor, though in weakness, to carry out that which is written in the word of God.

The present chapter is divided into two almost equal parts, the first twenty-six verses belonging properly to chapter eleven, as being entirely composed of genealogical tables similar to those of the previous chapter. The second division continues the course of the history, and contains the account of the feast of the dedication of the now completed wall of Jerusalem. This was turned into a great occasion of rejoicing and thanksgiving to God, who had not only brought the people back from the

strangers' land but had permitted them to surround His house and His holy city with a separating wall, testifying both to friends and enemies alike that they were under His care who had once scattered their nation because of unjudged sin.

From every quarter the Levites gathered "to keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings, and with singing, with cymbals, psalteries, and with harps" (ver. 27). It was a gladsome occasion indeed, and worthy of being joyously commemorated in coming years.

"The sons of the singers" were gathered together all about the city to participate in the general rejoicing. Jerusalem's wall was a symbol of salvation and her gates of praise.

After the priests and Levites had concluded a ceremony of purification, dedicating the people, the gates, and the wall to the Lord, Nehemiah brought up the princes of Judah upon the wall and divided all into two great companies, stretching out on the right and the left "toward the Dung Gate." With trumpets pealing out their notes of gladness and voices lifted up in songs of praise, the Levites and priests answered one another in antiphonal chants, after the manner of the 24th psalm, Nehemiah leading one company and Ezra the scribe the other. Thank-offerings were offered upon the altar, and "God made them rejoice with great joy"—as He always does when His people walk before Him in holiness and truth (vers. 31-43).

Nor were the servants of the Lord forgotten, for the people brought their tithes into the storehouse, and out of willing hearts gave abundantly for the maintenance of the sons of Aaron, in accordance with the Word (vers. 44-47).

One is reminded of the two-fold offering of Heb. 13: 15, 16: "By Him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But to do good and to communicate, forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased." These two offerings should never be divorced—thanksgiving going up to God from grateful hearts, and benevolence flowing forth toward men, the practical expression of that gratitude.

There is no surer indication of a low state in God's people than to find the poor among them left to suffer want, and the Lord's servants permitted to endure privation. These last are called to a path of trial, and must needs learn to be abased as well as to abound, to be full and to be empty; but whatever blessing they may find as they thus share Christ's sufferings, it is to the shame of the people of God, whose debtors they are. Were there more conscientious concern about this matter in many places, there would be richer and fuller ministry vouchsafed by God to His people, and more blessing in the assemblies of His saints, who often need to be reminded that:

"It never was loving that emptied a heart,  
Nor giving that emptied a purse."



Let God be honored with the first-fruits of our substance, and He will soon prove that He will be no man's debtor, but will abundantly confirm the word spoken by Malachi the prophet: "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in my house, and prove Me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the Lord of hosts" (Mal. 3: 10, 11). That this illustrates a great spiritual truth is certain. That many have proven it to be intensely literal is equally sure. And it has been to the eternal loss of greater numbers who have failed in this very thing, and forgotten that they were only the stewards, not the owners, of wealth entrusted to them, to be used in view of the everlasting habitations.

## CHAPTER XIII

### VIGILANCE *versus* DECLENSION

**T**HE striking contrast between the praiseworthy vigilance of Nehemiah in detecting and dealing with various phases of declension, and the continual tendency to drift away from obedience to the written Word, on the part of many of the people, is most marked in this closing chapter.

That serious evils soon developed is well known to the student of Jewish history. These were of two characters. On the one hand the separation truth of Nehemiah's day was soon held in a one-sided manner, so that position was everything and condition quite ignored. This resulted in Phariseeism—doctrinally correct in the main, but cold, rigid, and heartless—glorying in separation while ignoring the weightier matters of true piety and godly benevolence. On the other hand there was a re-action against all that savored of the puritanism of those days, so that the mass of the people became careless and indifferent, and, save that idolatry was never reinstated, became as impious as their fathers whose sins had brought the captivity. In all this we may well read a solemn warning, bidding us never separate condition from position, nor piety toward God from grace toward needy men.

Sanctification in its practical aspect is by the truth. Hence it is ever gradual—as the truth is learned in the fear of God. Of this we have a splendid example in the first nine verses. On the very day of the dedication of the wall (for so I understand the opening phrase), that portion of the book of Deuteronomy (chap. 23: 3, 4) was read, which we have already quoted in our notes on chapter two, and which commanded that the Ammonite and the Moabite should be excluded from the congregation of the Lord forever because of their iniquitous course towards Israel in the wilderness. This at once led to a closer application of the truth of separation than before. They had previously separated from all strangers; now they “separated from Israel all the mixed multitude” (ver. 3).

Of Tobiah the Ammonite, who had so bitterly resented the building of the wall in the beginning, and whose wiles had failed to turn Nehemiah aside from his purpose, we have not heard for a long time. Now we get the startling information that Eliashib the priest, who had the oversight of the dwellings of the priests at the house of God, had made a secret alliance with Tobiah during a hitherto unnoticed absence of Nehemiah, in which time he had returned to wait upon the king. The vigilant governor’s eye being no longer upon him, Eliashib abused his liberty by preparing “a great chamber” for the ungodly Ammonite, which had been formerly used as a

storehouse for the tithes and offerings. Probably this apartment was never occupied by Tobiah, for, ere Eliashib's plan could be fully carried out, Nehemiah returned. Hearing "of the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah in preparing him a chamber in the courts of the house of God," he was sorely grieved, but acted with his accustomed energy, thwarting the unholy purpose by casting the stuff of Tobiah out of the room and cleansing the chambers, into which he again brought the hallowed vessels with the offerings. What an example for the people; nor do we again read of any effort on the part of Tobiah to get a foothold in Jerusalem.

But another evil soon claimed the returned governor's attention. God's servants were being neglected by a self-seeking people, and unable to support those dependent upon them, the Levites and the singers, who a little before had willingly offered themselves for the service of the house of God, had gone back to their fields, toiling for daily bread. The test, doubtless, revealed a weakness in these men themselves, but it also showed the declining state of the people in neglecting the temporalities of the house of the Lord; so Nehemiah contends with the rulers, and stirs them up to attend to the gathering of the unpaid tithes. This being accomplished, the Levites could attend on their service (vers. 10-14).

A third sign of declension, encroaching upon the former determination to be faithful to God,

was evidenced in the laxity of some as to the sanctity of the Sabbath, the Lord's holy day, concerning which there had been such particular pledges made. Nehemiah saw some treading wine-presses and engaged in other secular occupations on the Sabbath, even buying and selling and carrying burdens on the day of rest. In vain at first he testified against them. Strangers from Tyre brought fish and other kinds of produce which they offered for sale, and for which they found ready buyers on the Sabbath. Thoroughly aroused, Nehemiah contended with the nobles, the rulers of the people, charging this profanation of the holy day upon them, and reminding them that it was for sin such as this that all the past evil had befallen the Jews and the city of Jerusalem. "Yet," he cries, indignantly, "ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the Sabbath" (vers. 13-18).

So, with his accustomed energy, he commanded the gates to be shut at sundown, as the Sabbath drew on, and not to be opened till it was past, while guards were set to see that no burden of any kind was brought into the city on that day. Once or twice the merchants and hucksters lodged all night and all day outside Jerusalem, vainly pleading for admission, but Nehemiah's orders were carried out to the letter. Finally, he threatened them with arrest if they came again with their wares on the Sabbath. Seeing the orders were meant to be carried out, they came no more on that day.

As polluted, the Levites were then commanded to cleanse themselves, and henceforth maintain a guard over the gates "to sanctify the Sabbath day." Thus for the time the evil was again judged and the declension stayed (vers. 17-22).

But not yet could vigilance be relaxed. The flesh was still at work. In spite of all that they had heard and seen, some had been marrying women of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. They may have excused themselves, as many do now, on the plea that they might lead these women to know and worship the one true God and learn the ways of Israel. But it was all a delusion. Children had been born of these unions, and these children were witness to the corruption that had been brought in. They "spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people" (vers. 23, 24). This is ever the fruit of such a yoke in marriage. The children soon follow the ways of the unregenerate parent and use the language of the flesh. Too late is the error realized. Too readily they follow the example and speech of the parent who knows not God.

Again Nehemiah's righteous anger burst forth. He contended with these unfaithful Jews and invoked the solemn judgments of the law upon them, even smiting some, and demanded of all that they swear by God no longer to countenance in any way these mixed marriages, from which only evil fruit could come. He reminded them how Solomon

himself had failed so miserably because of this very thing, and besought them to harken unto the law and not expect others to condone their offences (vers. 25-27). No doubt some would speak of his ways as hard and bitter; but *sin* is hard and bitter; and persistency in it often requires severe measures to put things right. It is often not a sign of spirituality to be placid and sentimentally affectionate. Such behavior frequently tells of a conscience asleep and a soul unexercised. There was a time when the Lord Jesus made a scourge of small cords—a bitter whip—to drive out the traders from God's house (John 2:15). Paul's language too was cutting and denunciatory when Satan's emissaries were seeking to overthrow divine truth; and God's wrath too shall be poured out without mixture in the cup of His indignation.

Another instance of declension closes both the chapter and the book. The grandson of Eliashib, the high priest, having married a daughter of Sanballat, the man of God, Nehemiah, drives him away from his presence. His grandfather's failure is brought again to mind in the descendant's defection.\* Remembering Eliashib's intriguing with Tobiah, we are not surprised to read of his grandson's association with the family of Sanballat. In defiance of all that Nehemiah had been

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\*It is not certain, though probable, that Eliashib the high priest is the same as Eliashib the chief priest of verse 4.

insisting on, this youth had married the guileful Horonite's daughter. He was the last with whom the governor had to deal, and he graphically declares, "Therefore I chased him from me." We can almost see the indignant countenance of the now aged Nehemiah as he learns of the perfidiousness of the son of Joiada, and we cannot but admire the energy with which the doughty old warrior drives the culprit from his presence—even making intercession in the spirit of Elijah *against* those who had defiled the priesthood and violated the covenant. Only by such stern measures could they be cleansed from all strangers.

Consistent to the last, Nehemiah appointed "the wards of the priests and the Levites, every one in his business; and for the wood-offering, at times appointed, and for the first-fruits." Nothing was too great for his faith, and nothing was too insignificant for his consideration if it concerned the house, the people, or the honor of the Lord his God. This was indeed "a faithful man, and one that feared God above many"—just such an one as the times demanded, and he held on his way unflinchingly to the end, neither cajoled by flattery nor intimidated by opposition, for to him the approbation of the God of Israel was infinitely more than the good opinion of carnal or natural men.

And so with the prayer, "Remember me, O my God, for good!" the record comes to an abrupt termination, and Nehemiah passes from our view,



only to appear again at the manifestation of the sons of God.

If we would learn something of the after-state of the Jews we must turn, as previously intimated, to the last book of the Old Testament, where we learn through Malachi's stern charges the low state into which the remnant had fallen; while the Gospels and the Acts give us the solemn sequel and show the children of those returned from the captivity rejecting both the Son of God come in flesh to them, and the Holy Spirit also!

Well will it be for Christians who may read these lines, to lay all to heart, that similar declension may be through the mercy of God averted in the present age of grace. May He grant it for His name's sake and the glory of His beloved Son. Amen!