Lecture on the Book of Ezra

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Ezra 1

God had given a sample of His kingdom upon the earth, in partial measure, either in David or in Solomon. Still, it was only the type of that which is yet to be, when the kingdom of God shall be established in its power, with its great central seat in Jerusalem, but also a most powerful system of blessing for the earth. We know there will be more than this, but this is not given us in the early books. In the prophets we find the Holy Ghost shows us a universal kingdom — a kingdom of all under the whole heaven.

And this touches the glory of God in a very special way, for in point of fact, it is to this that all Scripture turns. Whatever has been points onward to the future, for God has never yet had, except in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ — never yet had His full glory in the earth. And even in the Lord Jesus Christ, although there is nothing that ever will be so deep, nothing in which God's eye sees such perfection, nothing in which we who know Him and love Him may also have such communion with God in the delight of His own Son, still it was not His kingdom: it was the King, but not the kingdom. It was a kingdom given in His person, but not the kingdom given in power.

It was not yet the establishment of it; there was a display of the power in His person, that will cast out the devil, and that is the reason why so much scope and importance is attached in the Gospels to the expulsion of demons from men, and why it is the very first sample of

power put forth in that Gospel which, the most deeply of all, shows us what the power of Satan is now, and what the kingdom of God will be by and by, namely, the Gospel of Luke. It does not begin there with other works, but with that particularly. So also, in another way, Mark shows us similarly the power of Satan met and overcome by the superior power of God in the person of the Lord Jesus. It was a demoniac that is first healed in both cases. But we find, further, the painful history of the decline and fall of what God once established in Israel.

We now come to a fresh point in God's history — the intervention of grace towards a remnant whom He brings back from captivity into the land; and we have here in two books — Ezra and Nehemiah — both sides of the mighty work of God in His goodness; not power, but grace — not the establishment of anything according to the mind of God, but the grace of God intervening to sustain a remnant where there was not the authority of God establishing things according to His own mind — where the things were very far from it, but, nevertheless, where God's grace led those who enjoyed His secret — those that had faith — to confide in God under any circumstances, and, therefore, full of instruction to us who find ourselves now in a state of things remarkably analogous to that of the remnant that returned from Babylon. We shall find abundant proofs of this in the slight sketch that I may be enabled to give at this time.

I take up, of course, the first of them — Ezra — where the great point is the house of God. In Nehemiah we shall find the great point is the city: not the house, but the city. But still it is the relation of the remnant to God, and the ways of God's goodness in dealing with the

remnant — whether it be the building of the temple or the building of the wall — which is the main subject of these two books respectively.

And, first of all, we see the mighty change that had taken place in the fact that Cyrus the Persian is so prominent a Gentile. How strange that a Gentile should be in power! He sends a proclamation calling upon Israel, and in the name of Jehovah as a most open acknowledgment of His power. The truth is that Cyrus, so far, is a type of a greater than Cyrus, and for this reason it is that he appears in the judgment of Babylon. Now, Babylon, as it was the first great power of the world that was raised up in God's providence to chastise and parry away the ancient people of God because of their sins, so the judgment of Babylon sets forth the judgment of the world-power in its last shape. In this way, therefore, Cyrus in the prophecy of Isaiah is clearly viewed as a precursor on a small scale of a great deliverer who will come, the last act of the power of God at the end of the present dispensation being the fall of Babylon, followed by the coming of the Lord Jesus to take the kingdom. It is under the seventh vial that Babylon is finally judged, and then comes the Lord Jesus in the clouds of heaven to establish the people of God upon the earth, as well as to display the church and all the other heavenly saints above.

Now it is evident that the measure in which Cyrus prefigures this mighty deliverer is but small. Still, I have no doubt that God had all this in view when He was pleased in His own wonderful way to send out such a call by him, Cyrus king of Persia, who pronounces that the Jehovah God of heaven had given him all the kingdoms of the earth. We know how truly this will be

the case with Christ — that He is really the righteous man whom Cyrus set forth in a very small measure — that He is the one who will trample down the kings of the earth like mortar — that He is the one who will judge — that they shall be as stubble before His bow. But now Cyrus proclaims that the road was open to Jerusalem, and so far from hindering the return of the people of God, he encourages them in every possible way. He exhorts them to go up and build the house of God, and, further, that all people were to lend them their help along the road. Cyrus himself sets the example of that which he proclaims to others. For instead of contenting himself as a king naturally would with having let go a large band — a considerable band — of a race which had been so opposed to all other kingdoms (for so the Gentiles regarded Israel), he, furthermore, brings out the vessels of the house of God, and brings out the gold and the silver which Nebuchadnezzar had taken away from Jerusalem. All this is now given back to Israel in order that they might go with this confidence, not only that God providentially had made the road back, but that God had inclined the heart of the Gentile himself to the honour of the Jehovah God of heaven.

These, then, are the circumstances which come before us in the first chapter. But then, the state of things at that time in no wise answers to the reality that will be by and by. For instead of the Gentile being supreme, the plan and intention of God, we know well all through Scripture, is that Israel shall be the head and the Gentiles the tail. And, in fact, it is this alone which enables us to understand the history of the world, and the extraordinary state of the world ever since the Gentile times began. Men are and have long been, very

boastful of this very time that God calls the times of the Gentiles. What is it in God's mind? A state of confusion only controlled in God's providence by His setting up the basest of men to rule over it. So it is that God speaks of it. How humiliating! Whilst Gentile pride vaunts itself in its great men that govern the world, I repeat, God characterises it as a season — a mere interval of time — that has merely come in because of the rebellious, apostate sin of Israel, and, accordingly, He allows in His providence that the worst shall gain the upper hand. We cannot form a right judgment of the state of the world and of its history on a large scale without bearing that in mind.

This does not in the smallest degree hinder the Christian — the believer — from paying honour to the powers that be, for that is clearly our duty. As honour is not at all based upon their personal character, we have nothing at all to do with their origin, how they got their power, or how they use their power. All that we have got to do, as believers, is to own God and the magistrate. Perhaps the magistrate, or the king, does not own God himself. That is a serious thing for him, but it does not change our relation. Our duty, even if the kings or the magistrates were all infidels, is to acknowledge them to be God's ministers, no doubt blindly serving, but still as accomplishing in their position God's purpose, though they little think it themselves. In short, we are bound to pay this honour to the powers that be, and it is no question what their particular shape may be. It may be a monarchy or an empire, or a republic, or whatever men may own for the moment. Our business is to render honour and subjection to the higher powers. This makes the Christian's path extremely simple, and I press it,

beloved brethren, because we are in a time when altogether different views prevail. The spirit of the age is totally against what I am now saying. I give you, therefore, full warning as to it.

You must not expect to find what I am now saying in the thoughts of men, in the mouths of men, in the writings of men; but the contrary. Men regard themselves as the source of power, not God. They think it is purely a question of man's will. I grant you it may be man's will, as the mere outer source of it. But what people forget is this, that it is God that evermore governs, even though wicked men may be the instruments that come forward publicly. Our part is not with the instruments at all, but to own God in whatever He allows for the time being to have power upon the earth. And this the Lord Jesus Himself has shown us in the most clear and decided manner, for there were very different thoughts in Israel when the Lord Himself was here. But He has touched upon this question and shown it in that memorable answer of His to the Pharisees and the Herodians when He demanded of them to produce the coin, and pointed to the image and superscription of Cæsar, and gave them this decisive word, "Render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, and to God the things that are God's."

This is what belongs to the time meanwhile; but how great the change when all things in heaven and on earth shall be put under the King — "the Great King" — when the Lord Jesus will be not only the acknowledged Jehovah, but King over all the earth — when what was only in a partial and boastful manner said of the king of Persia, who was called "the great king," will be emphatically and intrinsically true of Him and of Him alone! Then how infinite the blessing! when the heavens

and earth shall be united all to His praise, and all the fruit of His grace, and all joined in His glory. This is what we wait for, and we know that by the grace of God we shall be with Himself on high. We shall be with Him and appear with Him in glory when He appears in glory. But this was only a partial type and so much the more partial because the state of things is real, and the confusion where God only holds the reins providentially though it might be by men who were heathen, for such is the state of the times of the Gentiles. And the times of the Gentiles you will remember began with Nebuchadnezzar, and will go on till the Lord Jesus appears in glory. We are in the times of the Gentiles now, only we are called out of the world by the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ in heaven. On this, however, I do not touch.

Ezra 2 brings before us, then, the remnant. We see clearly that it is a remnant, that it is no question of establishing Israel yet — a very important principle, because the true understanding of the prophecies depends upon this. If I look at the prophecies as a whole, their regular testimony is of the time when the kingdom will be established — when Israel as a whole shall be gathered — when not only the Jews but the whole of the ten tribes will be put under the Lord Jesus Christ. Consequently, nothing that has come in during the times of the Gentiles is a fulfilment of the prophecies.

It may accomplish some particular principle of them. For instance, now under the gospel we see, “Whoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Well, that will be accomplished, nay fulfilled, when Jerusalem shall be the earthly centre of God. But is anything we

know now the fulfilment of that prophecy of Joel? Not so. It is an accomplishment of it; but the fulfilment of it will be when Jerusalem shall come directly under the power and glory of God; and then in that mount of Zion it will be universal. Whoever shall call upon the name of Jehovah shall be saved, and the Lord shall extend the blessing to all flesh. The principle is true now, but the actual fulfilment of it will be then.

This, then, is very important — that the prophets look not merely to the remnant but to the nation. Prophets look not merely to an accomplishment, but to the fulfilment. In Christianity we get a remnant and we get an accomplishment and nothing more. We have the principle; but the full accomplishment awaits the future.

Well, now, in the second chapter we have most clearly this essential to understanding the prophecies of the Old Testament — that it was only a remnant, and an inconsiderable remnant — some 43,000 or rather less — between 42,000 and 43,000 of the people, chiefly Judah and Benjamin, that were brought back out of the captivity of Babylon; only ‘stragglers out of the ten tribes. The great mass of the ten tribes had been carried into Assyria a long time before. These were chiefly Jews who had been carried to Babylon, not to Assyria, so that we have thus, both in the numbers and in the persons — the tribes out of whom the remnant came — proof that it was not the fulfilment of the prophecies, but only a partial accomplishment, and we know the reason why. It was to leave room for the Lord’s coming in humiliation. The prophets looked for the Lord’s coming in glory. It was necessary that a remnant should go up to Jerusalem, and that the Lord should meet them in as much humiliation on His part, and a great deal more

than that humiliation of which they ought to have taken the place on their part. That is, it was but a little remnant, and the Lord came Himself in the deepest humiliation, as fully entering into their circumstances, meeting them where they were in order that He might show that, let things come to the worst, He was going down below the deepest of all shame and the most complete ruin in point of all circumstance. Nay, further, He was going down under sin and judgment itself, in order that He might deliver after a truly divine sort, in all the fulfilment of the grace of God, As this alone could be in humiliation, so do we see that their feeble return was directly suitable to the coming of the Lord in humiliation.

I do not dwell on the details. Indeed this is not at all my object in the present course of lectures. It is to give a general sketch to help souls in reading profitably this portion of the word of God for themselves. But I may mention one or two interesting facts, before I pass on. One is the care that was taken, as we see in the case of the priests. Their genealogy was insisted upon.

It is said, “And of the children of the priests: the children of Habaiah, the children of Koz, the children of Barzillai; which took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called after their name: these sought their register among those that were reckoned by genealogy, but they were not found: therefore were they, as polluted, put from the priesthood. And the Tirshatha (or governor) said unto them, that they should not eat of the most holy things” — that is, they should not have the full enjoyment of priestly privilege — “till there stood up a priest with Urim and with Thummim.” That is, till the Lord Jesus comes by and by who will, no doubt, be the

King, and will also act in the full power of priesthood, the power of Urim and Thummim in the lights of perfections of God, and will then disentangle all the confusion, and supply all that is lacking.

But what I call your attention to is the principle that although it was a day of weakness and humiliation it was not to be a day of negligence but of the greatest care. It was to be a day when God's people were to be as watchful and vigilant for His name as when things were in the full power and beauty of divine order. This I hold to be very precious for ourselves now. In the present confusion of Christendom we are called to exercise the greatest care with regard to those who bear the name of the Lord — those that take the place of being near to God, which, of course, ought to be in all that are accepted as members of Christ's body — as true worshippers that come together in His name. And therefore we are entitled to demand that they shall prove their genealogy. The reason is plain, because now people generally take the place of Christians without reality. We are bound to require that there shall be the proof that they really are what they profess to be, that is, we are not to yield to the mere general profession. While owning it as a fact, we are to demand that there shall be the adequate proof to carry conviction.

This was not so necessary in the earliest days. Then the Spirit of God came down in power. There was novelty in it, and a seriousness for man to break off all his old associations and to come together in the name of the Lord Jesus. And the danger was such that, as a rule, men would not come unless they were truly led of God. When there was some person with penetration but without conscience who saw the power that might be turned to

his own selfish purposes he might come on false ground. I refer now to Simon Magus; yet, as a rule, I repeat, people did not come unless they were real. But in these days it is not so, and we know well that people deceive themselves — that people may not know what it is really to be converted to God — what it is to be members of Christ's body. They have been wrongly taught: they have been brought up in an unhealthy and corrupting atmosphere; and, therefore, it is necessary, I repeat, that we should require that the genealogy should be proved; that is that there should be full evidence that they really are Christ's in the true and proper sense of the word — that they are brought to God.

Now, there may be persons at the present time who, though they will be in heaven, yet are such whom we should not accept on earth. There may be persons to be declined because they cannot prove their genealogy. The Lord may see, in the midst of a great deal that is very painful, what is real, but we must look to God simply according to the measure of discernment that He gives.

Ezra 3 - 5.

But now in the third chapter there is a principle of very great beauty that comes before us. When the remnant did return, and when they showed this care in not being lax as to those who took the place of nearness to God, what is the first mark of that? What gave them their character before God? In this we find they were united, "they set the altar upon his bases, for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries" (Ezra 3:2). How beautiful! It is not that they began with the wall. It is the more remarkable because there is another book which is devoted to the building of the wall,

namely, the book of Nehemiah; but they began with God and not with themselves. They began with the great expression of acceptance before God. The altar was the link between God and His people — was the point of contact, so to speak, between them — was the place where they made their offerings. Their thank-offerings, their burnt offerings — all were brought to the altar. It was, in short, therefore, what showed that the first thought of their hearts was God's worship according to their measure, and not merely their own skill or their own prowess against their enemies, and this the more strikingly because the reason given is that fear was upon them, and that fear led them to God and not to themselves or to other men. It is not a petition to the king — to Cyrus, nor is it even the lacking the ways and means of erecting a defence against their enemies.

The first thing they did was to "set the altar upon his bases," and to offer offerings unto God. "And they offered burnt offerings thereon unto Jehovah, even burnt offerings morning and evening." And, further, it is expressly stated that this was done on the part of "Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren," who "builded the altar of the God of Israel to offer burnt offerings thereon, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God. And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries: and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto Jehovah, even burnt offerings morning and evening. They kept also the feast of tabernacles as it is written" (vers. 2, 3).

What, then, marked them was this — jealousy for the word of God — but the word of God used with a single

eye. For it is not taking up such parts of the word of God as would bear upon their own doings for themselves; but rather what they owed to such a God. In short, it is a beautiful sample of the faith of the remnant. The first thought of their heart was God, and so much the more because they were really afraid of the enemies round about; but that fear was expressed, not in human measures to guard against that which they dreaded, but in drawing near to God, to own Him, to praise Him. "They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as it is written," Therefore we find their jealous care for the word of God. It was not one thing only, but the authority of the word filled their hearts. So, at any rate, it is that God speaks of it — that God presents them to us. We find, alas! their failure; but this is the way that they began on returning from captivity. "They kept also the feast of tabernacles as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the custom, as the duty of every day required; and afterward offered the continual burnt offering." So that there was no weariness of it: it was no transient act. There was the daily offering. This is a very important thing.

It is always to me a very unhappy circumstance, beloved brethren, to see God's children merely putting in an appearance on the Lord's Day morning — the mere keeping up an outward link with the Lord and with His people. I admit that there may be circumstances where it cannot but be so — extreme sickness, or there may be positive duties of the most peremptory kind. I am not alluding to them, and we ought to be slow, therefore, to judge in any individual case until we know the facts; but I do say as a general rule now, that the same faith which makes us value the coming together to meet the Lord at

His own table ought to make us rejoice to meet the Lord on every occasion, and further, to provide by every means for growing in the truth. For that is one great source of our weakness in worship? It is because we are not growing in spiritual intelligence. If we were using the truth of God and growing up unto Christ in all things there would be a greater fulness in worship and, allow me to add, greater simplicity. There would not be merely the continual use of the same thing, but we should have fresh thoughts without even thinking about them — without an effort, because our hearts would be filled day by day with His truth, and, therefore, it is of so much importance to avail ourselves of every hour.

The early church evidently felt this, for they used to break bread every day, They used to meet together daily; and that did not satisfy them. There were other times. They went up even to the temple. It is a mistake to suppose that freshness and fulness of joy depends on a great deal of knowledge, for this was not the case in the church at Jerusalem. They were still very much affected by the old state of things in Israel. They went up to the temple, therefore, for some time afterwards. A great number of the priests were turned to the faith, and, for aught I know, they may have offered their bullocks and their rams still; but yet they had got hold of the true sacrifice. They had got hold of the truth of Christ, and, as sure as they had, the day would come when they would have done with their bullocks and rams; but the day would never come when they would have done with Christ. They would learn much better, and believe more fully And God may give us the truth, the effects of which we never realised when we received it; but the effect of that truth will be to drive from our souls, whatever is

alien to it, because it is alien to God's will. Therefore it is that you must give people time to grow. You need to be patient with them. You should seek to strengthen them and cheer them and encourage them to receive the truth. Instead of expecting the consequences all at once, leave room for growth. It is very easy, and it is a human thing to get a quantum of truth into the mind; but that is not life, that is not power, that is not growth. What is divine lives, and what lives must have a root and must grow, and for this time must be given. It is not the sign of growth to expand all in a moment. A human mind may take things in. If a man is bright he may take things in very quickly; but that is worth nothing. What shines out so brightly may go out just as fast, whereas what is of God will live and abide.

We see, then, that the word had a great place in their souls — authority over their consciences, and this from the first, and it formed them not only for that special feast, but for the daily one — the burnt offering — the daily burnt offering. Of course, I am speaking of this now as regards the Jews. But then it has a voice for us as well.

"From the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt offerings unto Jehovah. But," it is added, "the foundation of the temple of Jehovah was not yet laid" (ver. 6). Thus, you see, there was progress there. No remnant that was ever called out by grace arrived all at once at the truth that God is going to give them. It is a matter of growth as a whole, not only individual growth. But they did not arrive at the understanding of His mind and of His word, and they are not able to do at the beginning what they may understand, and have power for, another day. "The foundation of the temple of

Jehovah was not yet laid." But we find in the midst of this state of things that "in the second year of their coming unto the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, began Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the remnant of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all they that were come out of the captivity unto Jerusalem; and appointed the 1,evites, from twenty years old and upward, to set forward the work of the house of Jehovah." This is noteworthy. They had no thought that all the work was done because they simply got to Jerusalem — that they were simply there owned as Israelites. There was what concerned Jehovah's glory.

This is most important; because many souls at the present time seem to think that the only blessedness and the only thing that is to be called work is the conversion of sinners — the bringing them to God. Never was a greater mistake. Now, I can thank God for it that in the present very low condition of Christendom even the weakest of saints feels the importance of a soul being born to God. Instead of being offended at that I rejoice in it. I rejoice that there are even Roman Catholics who really seek conversions, and I remember hearing of a child of one of our own brothers in Germany that was brought to the Lord by the labours of a young Roman Catholic man. He had received a mortal wound in battle at the time of one of the campaigns of his country. He was a foolish, giddy young man who had heard the truth; but he did it not till death was before his eyes and the judgment of God; but the person employed for his conversion was a Roman Catholic. This was a great rebuke, undoubtedly. It was a person who evidently followed the Lord and who loved the Lord, though in

great darkness. Thus the Lord may employ, and not without a reason — a humiliating reason — one in a system of grossest spiritual darkness to be the means of pointing to the light and life of God one who ought to have known incomparably better. Well, then, God is sovereign, and He does these things; and therefore I am never surprised if they tell me that God has employed this person or that in circumstances of the most painful kind. Yet God looks for and uses fidelity. He will always bless those that go forth in the name of the Lord Jesus to win sinners, seeking their conversion. And He will give them their conversion.

But still there is another work. And allow me to say that this is a special work for the people of God — not merely the going up of the Israelites, and the recognising of the priests and the Levites; but work is done for the house of Jehovah, the great corporate work of gathering round the name of Jehovah. That is what we find was so peculiarly dear to Israel, and this is the thing which they set about when they got to Jerusalem — when they were, each individual, in their proper place. What brings them together as a matter of work was the carrying on that work, and what kept them together was the using this central place of the name of Jehovah as that which had a divine claim on their consciences and on their hearts.

Now, it is this of which I want to see a little more, beloved brethren, and I believe that the Lord wants to see more of it. It is the all-important thing for us — not less care for souls, not less concern for their conversion, but — a far deeper, stronger sense of what concerns the glory of the Lord in His own people. And it is the more important because, where is it cared for? Who feels about it? You may find persons — Arminians, Calvinists,

Dissenters, Churchmen, occupied about conversion where they are godly; but you will and none of them that enters into the glory of the Lord in His church; and, therefore, I am persuaded that we are the more responsible who have been made to feel in some measure what the church is. On us, poor and weak as we are, devolves very specially the responsibility of giving expression to that truth. That is our heart's care and desire for the good of the church of God — for that which concerns the name of the Lord committed to the trust of man here below.

And when we find the Israelites here together with this view, a remarkable difference appears among them. "When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of Jehovah, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise Jehovah after the ordinance of David, king of Israel. And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto Jehovah; because he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised Jehovah, because the foundation of the house of Jehovah was laid. But 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" (vers. 10-12). Strange, at first sight, that the self- same thing should be the source of joy to the one and of tears to the other.

Why so? It was the cause of tears to the elder men because they felt how poor was the present expression of Jehovah's glory in their midst compared with what they had once seen — a source of joy to the others

because they had only known the utter prostration of the name of the Lord upon the earth, and now their hearts were glad that at any rate there was a distinct and decided confession of that name as entitled to gather together His people, even though it were but a remnant here below. They were both right; and yet the expression of their hearts, how different I But of the two, surely, beloved brethren, it was not that the elder men did not feel the joy of the foundation being laid; but still the sense of sorrow and of humiliation for His name exceeded it. There was, therefore, a more chastened feeling with the elder men. Both were led, and led of the Lord, but in very different measures. And I am persuaded that, of the two, the elder men had the deeper sense of God's glory.

But there never is a blessing of God upon the earth without drawing out the wiles and enmity of the devil; and so we find on this occasion. There were persons who "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, which brought us up hither" (Ezra 4:2). How kind it seemed I how fair, that now at least, instead of the old antagonism, their neighbours were going to be so friendly — to help them to build and to worship and to serve the same Lord as they!

Surely Israel ought to rejoice! Nay, beloved brethren, in this world we have always to judge. We must take care how we judge, but nevertheless, we have to judge. We have to prove all things and hold fast that which is good; and so they did on this occasion. Zerubbabel and Jeshua were not taken in in these later days, as were Joshua

and the princes on a somewhat similar occasion long before, when the Gibeonites came up in their pilgrim guise. “Zerubbabel and Jeshua, and the rest of the chief of the fathers of Israel, said unto them, Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto Jehovah God of Israel, as king Cyrus, the king of Persia, hath commanded us.” No doubt it was a state of weakness, a state of humiliation, for why mention king Cyrus? What had he to do? What a strange position that he should be commanding Israel! But so it was. They were really humbled, and humbled publicly in the earth, and they were not taken out of that state of humiliation. But while indebted to the powers that then were for their protection and that measure of good government which they enjoyed, still they maintained rigorously the word of God for the special place of Israel. They are as distinct at least, if not more so, than they were in the days of Moses, or David, or any other. Never was there a deeper sense in Israel of the special place of Israel than when they were thus low and feeble.

What a lesson for us! We are not to give up the peculiar place of the church of God because we are only a remnant. We are not to give up the principle that none but those who are members of that body — accepted as such — have their place of responsibility in the work of the Lord. We are not to yield to the spirit of the times that is around us. So, at any rate, Zerubbabel and Jeshua decided, and they were right. Then the people of the land weakened their hands. Now they showed what they really were — not friends, but adversaries. And mark, beloved friends, they were adversaries, though they were worshipping the Lord God of Israel —

adversaries, though they were not idolaters, as far as we know, at this time. That is not what is said, but they were not Israel. That was enough. The adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of Israel were building the temple, and therefore it was that they came. They came under the garb of Israel; but it was really to hinder. Such was Satan's object; but he was foiled. Nevertheless, it is said that they "weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building; and hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even unto the reign of Darius king of Persia" (vers. 4, 5).

Here there is a considerable lapse. Several kings reigned between these two, and they are given in the rest of the chapter which is a parenthesis (vers. 6-23) to explain what took place between those two points. "And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, wrote they unto him an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. And in the days of Artaxerxes wrote Bishlam, Mithredath, etc." All this took place, and the consequence was that their pretentious opposition at least did take effect and troubled the Israelites, and they ceased from the work. But mark this — and it is a very important thing — God does not attribute the ceasing of the work to the command of the king, although the king did give in at last, and did yield to their importunate begging of him to stop the Israelites; but the Israelites began to stop before the authority of the king. It was want of faith, and not the king's authority that stopped the work; and, beloved friends, as a rule, is it not always so? The cessation of blessing among God's people is really never the work of

the enemy without, but want of faith, and, consequently, of faithfulness within.

This is all-important for us to bear in mind, because we are so apt to lay the blame on circumstances. They might well do it here. They were wrong. God would have been with them had their faith looked up to Him, and He would have preserved them from ceasing that work. But inasmuch as they were too much occupied with what people said and did, outside them, instead of looking to God according to that good beginning when they set the altar upon its base — instead of crying to Him they listened to the adversary, and stopped their work, and the adversary managed to get the king's authority to seal what they had already done.

There is another thing, too, of exceeding interest, and that is, that the way that God set this to right was not by the king's authority, opening the door again, but the direct intervention of His own power — the power of the Spirit of God by the prophets (Ezra 5). It is by the prophets, not by the king — not by Darius. "Then the prophets, Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied unto the Jews that were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, even unto them. Then rose up Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and began to build" (vers. 1, 2). How bold faith is! And God justifies the faith that He gives, for although this looked as though it was a want of deference to the royal authority, the fact is that they had, at least, as good an authority for going on with the work. For, in point of fact, if Artaxerxes here stops the building of the house, Cyrus had previously authorised the building of it. They did what was quite right. They regarded as an accident what Artaxerxes brought in.

They regarded it as a thing merely brought about by circumstances. They viewed it as a commandment, not of Persia, but of himself. They go back to what Cyrus had commanded. They knew well that it was one of the great maxims of the Persian kingdom that the laws of the Medes and Persians did not change. It was Artaxerxes that had changed.

Had Artaxerxes forbidden the building of the temple at the beginning, they might have been rather in a difficulty. There would have been the direct claim of God on the one hand, against that of the kingdom on the other, and the principle that we must obey God rather than men. But in point of fact, it was really, you see, between two kings, with this only difference, and a very great one, that the first and the greatest king, the founder of the Persian monarchy — was the very one that had commanded the building of the temple. They were right, therefore in acting upon his edict. The other had merely come in influenced by temporary circumstances, and he had indeed passed away. They were quite justified in falling back upon the word of Cyrus, but the truth of it is, that the grand thing that influenced their souls was that it was the word of God — through the prophets. I point out this to show how beautifully God can give, along with the word of the prophet, the justification of what His people did; and this is the more important because, as you know, this very thing is alluded to in the prophets. The prophet Isaiah particularly names, in connection with Cyrus, the building of the house of Jehovah. It is distinctly connected with him — not only the destruction of Babylon, but the building of Jehovah’s house, so that the children of the captivity were amply justified, as God

always gives faith His full protection as well as guidance.

So, then, the prophets began to stir up the hearts of the people, and the people went forward according to the word of the Lord, and God took care of the king. God took care that although influence had been brought out against the people through the wickedness of the Samaritan instigators, and Artaxerxes had been influenced to see that Israel, and the Jews, and Jerusalem particularly, had bean a rebellious city, now comes a new search. Darius looks into the matter, and it is a well known fact in history, as we find it exactly in this book, that Darius was always disposed to act upon what Cyrus had done. He had the greatest regard and reverence for Cyrus as the founder of the empire. He had a desire to be a restitutor of all the institutions of Cyrus. Hence, therefore, we can see the beautiful appropriateness, and Darius does not care in the least for Artaxerxes or anybody else. He goes back to Cyrus, and he finds that Cyrus fully authorised what the Jews wished, against their adversaries. Thus God knows how to divert and suit everything. Our business is not to be setting one king against another, but to go forward in the name of the Lord — to take His word as our full warrant, perfectly sure that as we seek to be guided by God, it is God’s part to guide all men and all circumstances. That is His work, not ours. Our part, in short, is to go on in faith. He knows how to deal with those that oppose us.

Ezra 6 - 10.

“Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in the house of the rolls, where the treasures were

laid up in Babylon. And there was found at Achmetha, in the palace that is in the province of the Medes, a roll, and therein was a record thus written: — In the first year of Cyrus the king, the same Cyrus the king made a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, Let the house be builded" (Ezra 6:1-3). That was enough for Darius; so accordingly he says "Now therefore, Tatnai governor beyond the river, Shethar-boznai, and your companions the Apharsachites, which are beyond the river, be ye far from thence." He gave them a rebuke, "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." And so far from listening to their adversaries he puts honour upon them — makes fresh commands, carrying out still more fully what had been already proclaimed in the first year of Cyrus. "Also, I have made a decree, that whosoever shall alter this word, let timber be pulled down from his house, and being set up, let him be hanged thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this. And the God that hath caused his name to dwell there, destroy all kings and people that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I, Darius, have made a decree; let it be done with speed."

Thus the adversaries were completely refuted, and stopped in their evil work, and the house of God received — I will not say an impulse, but — its completion; for the beautiful fact, as we have already seen, is that the Jews had faith to resume the building of the house before they got this fresh decree. "And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered [not through the commandment of the king, but they prospered] through the prophesying of Haggai the

prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo: and they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia." For now that God had given them power, God also controlled all the powers to be now in their favour. "And this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king. And the children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy."

In Ezra 7 we have a very important and fresh feature in this book, and that is the mission of Ezra, who comes, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes, to visit the children of Israel. "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of Jehovah, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments" (Ezra 7:10). This is a most important thing, beloved brethren, for those who are in the place of the remnant now. It is not the vain asking for power — a great snare in a broken state of things. When the church began, it began with power, but now it is in a state of ruin. It is not power that we want, but self-judgment — self-judgment and the heart to obey — to do the will of God, which always goes along with self-judgment. Whereas the difference is this. If people think that the great want is power, they virtually throw the blame upon God. They say that there is such weakness now. "It is no use to meet together to worship the Lord or to do anything else: we have not power." Vain foolish thought! Most peculiarly so to those who know that the very essence of what God has wrought in the church is to send down the Holy Ghost to be therein for ever, and if the Holy Ghost be not power I know not what is. But,

beloved friends, what we really want is faith in the power that we have got, instead of these murmurs and complaints, as if God had taken away the power, and as if our business was to go on in our own poor and wretched way crying out for power. Not so. What we have to do is to put our hand upon our mouth, and ourselves in the dust, and to take the place of real humiliation where there is that which hinders the action of the Spirit of God. But the great point is to seek in humiliation to do His will.

Some years ago there was a working among certain persons who bore the name of the Lord, and they took, formally, their position upon this need of power; and they cried to God for power At any rate they cried for power. What was the consequence? They got power; but I am persuaded that that power was really of the devil, and not of God; and although there seemed to be most remarkable things done, and even a sort of painful imitation of the gift of tongues, it was only a sham: it was a non-reality: it was of Satan. It began, and it ended too, with the most frightful departure from the truth of God, and the most complete dishonour that was ever put upon the name of the Lord up to that day. There never was such systematic dishonour of the Lord Jesus in the church, as far as I know, as that which took place as the result of all this. Whereas, beloved friends, what should characterise us — that true work of God in which, through the grace of God, we have our part, is this — not the crying out for power, and staying in disobedience till we get power, but ceasing from the evil, and seeking of God to learn to do well — the acknowledging of the sin of the church and of our own sin, in particular — our own failure, and separating, at once, according to the

light that God gives us, from what we know to be offensive in His sight.

This was exactly what filled the heart of Ezra. He comes with his heart set upon doing the will of God. This is the great thing. “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of Jehovah and to do it and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments. Now this is the copy of the letter that the king Artaxerxes gave unto Ezra the priest, the scribe.” On this I need not dwell. Ezra is empowered to act then; but the grand point, you observe, is the purpose of his heart to do the will of God. And this we are entitled to expect now, that is, our heart should be towards the Lord, as we find, for instance, was the case with the church in Philadelphia. How does the Lord introduce Himself to us there? What does He speak about His action? “I have set before thee an open door.” He has power to open, and none can shut, and to shut, and none can open. But the way He here uses this power is to set before us an open door. In the book we are considering, king Artaxerxes is the figure of one that sets an open door before Ezra. Yes, but Ezra’s heart was set to do the will of God. God works all outward circumstances, and opens the way when our heart inwardly is set to do the right thing in the sight of the Lord. We have no ground ever to complain of circumstances if only our heart be right with the Lord. The Lord can and will take care of all else.

What we, then, have to do is to judge ourselves. I am persuaded that this is the great want at the present moment of the remnant in Christendom, not to be asking for power which, if it were given, might be the ruin of us. We want rather ballast to carry the truth we have got than to have full sails to carry us (I fear) in a more

uncomely way than we are even doing now. For do not we all know, beloved friends, that our knowledge is far beyond our grace; and do you think, that we want something more to make us top-heavy? I am persuaded the very contrary — that what we want is rather the spirit of self-judgment instead of giving ourselves greater airs than we are apt to assume even now. We should seek to carry the truth of God in lowliness of mind, and in love, and in a deep sense of our shortcomings. This is the thing which becomes us. This is what we ought to seek. Power in such a state of things would be ruinous to us, I am persuaded, and therefore I thank God that He is not pleased to give more power of that sort. What we need is the action of the Spirit in our self-judgment, and if that were the case our blessing would flow like a river.

Well, Ezra proceeds; and he gathers together out of Israel chief men. “And I gathered them together to the river that runneth to Ahava: and there abode we in tents three days: and I viewed the people, and the priests, and found there none of the sons of Levi” (Ezra 8:15). There was a lack in the work, you observe, a lack of energy for the work. “Then sent I for Eliezer, for Ariel, for Shemaiah, and for Elnathan, and for Jarib, and for Elnathan, and for Nathan, and for Zechariah, and for Meshullam, chief men; also for Joiarib, and for Elnathan, men of understanding. And I sent them with commandment unto Iddo the chief, at the place Casiphia, and I told them what they should say unto Iddo, and to his brethren the Nethinims, at the place Casiphia, that they should bring unto us ministers for the house of our God. And by the good hand of our God upon us, they brought us a man of understanding, of the

sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel," and so on. "Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God." That is the point. It is not asking for power, but it is afflicting themselves before God. It is humiliation of spirit before the Lord, that the Lord may be able to entrust us with a blessing. "I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance. For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers" — it was not outward power: that was not the thing — "and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him. So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was intreated of us." And instead of a band of soldiers protecting them, God protected them, which was much better. So they came up through all their enemies.

When Ezra found himself in the midst of the people, there was a solemn and painful sight that met him (Ezra 9). There was this humiliation even in the captivity before he entered the land; but when he comes into the land it is a most painful sight. Those that had already returned from the captivity — those that were gathered towards the name of Jehovah in Jerusalem — he found in the most painful circumstances. He found sources of shame and sorrow. He found cases of evil. He found the most grievous sights and sounds among them.

Oh, beloved friends, what a sad thing for the heart of the man that had been afflicting himself before God away from the land among some of the people that were

there. Now he came up and found that those that ought to have been so impressed with the sense of the grace of God, and so resting upon His protecting hand, were themselves in a state of carelessness, laxity, departure inwardly from His ways. They are outwardly near Him, but inwardly far from Him. So we are told. “Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites” (Ezra 9:1). It was not even so with the Samaritans. Positively, here were persons that were in Jerusalem, and not only people, but priests, doing after the abominations of the Canaanites. And you are sometimes surprised, beloved friends, that among those that are gathered unto the name of the Lord Jesus there should be distressing developments of evil. Why, it must be so. They were not walking with God. The very worst forms of evil will be found where you are closest to the Lord if you are not walking with Him — if you are not kept by Him; because Satan’s great effort is against that. It is that which he hates above all that is on the face of the earth.

When people are walking hand in hand with the world, Satan can leave them. He knows where the world will lead them, and if flesh and spirit are joined hand in hand it is always flesh that gets the uppermost. The only way to walk in the Spirit is to judge the flesh — to have nothing to do with it, but denounce it — to mortify our members that are upon the earth. But all attempts to have a friendly harmony between the flesh and the Spirit is vain. Therefore Satan can leave that harmony to take

its course. He knows right well that that which is fleshly will always break down in the things of God, whatever there may be of the Spirit connected with it. But where persons come out from the world and are on the professed ground of the judgment of the flesh, if the world is allowed by the heart, or the flesh is tampered with, and, above all in the worship of God — in the meeting of His people — if we indulge any personal feelings, or allow our own thoughts to govern us or our own feelings — what can it come to but the most distressing and unnatural sights? It is even worse than in the decent world. The decent world will, at any rate, keep an appearance; but where we have learned the vanity of appearance, and where it must be either Spirit really or flesh really, if there is a tampering with evil there, and the allowance of it there, flesh will come out in its worst form and Satan will bring the deepest dishonour on the name of the Lord.

So it was here. It was not in Babylon, but in Judæa, that they were doing after the manner of the Canaanites. It was not the persons that were far away from Jerusalem. It was the people and the priests here who had slipped away from the will of the Lord. It was they that were "doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands: yea, the head of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass." Oh, think of that! "The head of the princes and rulers have been chief in this trespass." And do you suppose, beloved brethren, that we are clear

from such dangers? In no wise. Let us then look earnestly to God; but let us remember this, that all true blessing for us must begin with individual blessing, and that the secret of individual blessing will always be found to have its root in self-judgment before God. We shall find that this is exactly so with Ezra who had been afflicting his soul and getting others to afflict their souls down in the captivity. So also in Jerusalem.

“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 astonied. Then were assembled unto me every one that trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those that had been carried away; and I sat astonied until the evening sacrifice. And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto Jehovah my God, and said, 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. And now for a little space grace hath been showed from Jehovah our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place.” And thus, you see, Ezra takes a place of deeper humiliation than that. It was not merely a fast now, but there is this sign of more profound humiliation — the rending his garments — the sitting astonished even till the evening sacrifice, and only then spreading

out his hands to the Lord to pray for his people as well as to confess.

But he is not content with this; for in the next chapter (Ezra 10) we read, “When Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God” — not telling other people to do so, merely, but doing it himself — “there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore. And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said unto Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land: yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing” (vers. 1, 2). They were right: they looked to God. They saw that it was a question between God and His people, and they apply it to their own selves, and the work of repentance goes on, and works meet for repentance. The result is this — that Ezra rises in answer to their call, “and made the chief priests, the Levites, and all Israel, to swear that they should do according to this word. And they sware. Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went unto the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib: and when he came thither, he did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away. And they made proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem unto all the children of the captivity, that they should gather themselves together unto Jerusalem; and that whosoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the princes and the elders, all his substance should be forfeited, and himself separated from the congregation of those that had been carried away. Then all the men of

Judah and Benjamin gathered themselves together" (vers. 5-9).

And Ezra stands up again, and now taxes them plainly with their sin. "Ye have transgressed," says he, "and have taken strange wives" — the great mark of apostasy for an Israelite, as far as the people were concerned — apostasy from God in taking a strange god, and apostasy from the people by taking strange wives. It was a complete giving up of their holy place of separateness to the Lord. "Now, therefore," says he, "make confession unto Jehovah, God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives" (vers. 10, 11).

Now, we know what this must be, because we know how the wives would appeal to their husbands' love, and how the poor children would be on their knees to ask why their fathers should disown them. We know what a scene of grief and of entreaty this must have been, and what a time of agony to many a father and mother in Israel that had been thus found out in their sin. But the truth is that there is no real repentance without deep grief and pain. More particularly is it so where it is the sin, not merely of a sinner, but of the people of God — where they have a deep sense that, as God's people, they have brought His name into such contempt, and where this has gone on, it may be, for years. There cannot, therefore, be steps taken in that path of repentance without its costing much to the heart on every side, and so it was at this time.

The congregation are grieved, and they begin with putting away, as it is said: — "And Ezra the priest, with certain chief of the fathers, after the house of their

fathers, and all of them by their names, were separated, and sat down in the first day of the tenth month to examine the matter. And they made an end with all the men that had taken strange wives by the first day of the month. And among the sons of the priests there were found that had taken strange wives: namely, of the sons of Jeshua the on of Jozadak, and his brethren; Maaseiah, and Eliezer, and Jarib, and Gedaliah. And they gave their hands that they would put away their wives; and being guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their trespass" (vers. 16-19). And so with others. "All these had taken strange wives: and some of them had wives by whom they had children" (ver. 44).

Thus the deeper the departure from the Lord, and the more fruits there were of that departure, the deeper the pain. So it always is. Still, here we see that the grace of God is equal to every difficulty. All that we want is a single eye: all that they wanted was the same. But we, beloved brethren, are now concerned. We are those, or among those, to whom God addresses such words as these now, and may the Lord give us to be found faithful; but faithfulness, in such a day as this, never can be separated from a willingness to see wherein we have been wrong, and a readiness to see it — a disposition, through the heart being subject to the word of God, to search and see it continually, and may God give us grace to be true to His own word. Amen.

W. K.