Synopsis of the Books of the Bible

Ezra

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882)

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Introduction

God's threat fulfilled: kingly power in Gentile hands

The events which we have been considering, at the close of Kings and Chronicles, were deeply significant. The throne of God was no longer at Jerusalem. God had fulfilled His threat of casting off the city which He had chosen. He had bestowed the throne of the earth upon the Gentiles (Daniel 2:37). Not only had Israel failed under the old covenant, and rejected God (1 Samuel 8:7), so that God was no longer their king; but even after grace had raised up the house of David to sustain the relations of the people with God, under the rule of that house everything was entirely corrupted by sin; so that there was no more remedy, and God had written Loammi (not my people), as it were, on the forehead of a people who had forsaken Him. The counsels of God cannot fail; but such was the sad state in which the relationship between this people and God stood, if it can be said that a judgment like this allowed any relationship still to exist. So far as it depended on Israel, on man, all was lost. The consequences of this, with respect to God's dealings, were of great importance; they were nothing less than His taking His throne from the earth, casting off His people for the time as to His earthly government, and transferring power to the Gentiles. Man, in probation under the law, had failed, and he was condemned. He had been sustained in the way of grace through means which God had granted, in the family of David, for his continuance in the enjoyment of the blessings granted him, and he had failed again. Kingly power was in the hands of the Gentiles, and the people were under condemnation according to the old covenant.

Chapter 1

The return of a little remnant from captivity

But God now brings back a little remnant, that the true King might be presented to them, and causes the temple to be rebuilt in its place, according to the promises given by the mouth of Jeremiah, and at the request of His servant Daniel.

The latter, indeed, still at Babylon, had a deeper sense of the real condition of the people, than they had who were rebuilding the temple, and received also much more extensive information as to the future destiny of Israel and the intentions of God respecting it. But a due appreciation of this return from captivity also is not without importance, since it is evident that the understanding of God's dealings with respect to the restoration of Israel, and the coming amongst them upon earth of Messiah Himself is connected with this event. It was the will of God that there should be some respite. The current of His purposes, however, concerning the times of the Gentiles, and the position of His people, was unaltered. They were still in subjection to the Gentiles* {* The coming of Christ did not change this. The restoration of the remnant gave occasion to the presentation of Christ to the people according to the promises; but His rejection left their house desolate to see Him no more till their repentance in the last days. Meanwhile, during His lifetime on earth, not only have we, in Luke, the epoch divinely dated by the reigns of Gentile rulers, but, pressed on the point, the Lord refers to their position and baffles their

hypocrisy, which would have profited by what was the fruit and wages of their own sin to put Him in an inextricable difficulty, by telling them to give to Caesar what was Caesar's, and to God what was God's. Meanwhile deeper and more blessed counsels were accomplished.}.

Cyrus called of Jehovah to fulfil His word

It is Cyrus, king of Persia, who commands the people to return to Jerusalem, and to rebuild the temple. A type himself in some respects, of a far more glorious deliverer, he confesses Jehovah, the God of Israel, to be the true God. He is "the righteous man, raised up from the east, who treads down the princes like mortar." Called of Jehovah by name for this purpose, he favours Israel and honours Jehovah. Distinguished and blessed by the favour of the mighty God, a man whose conduct was certainly under the guidance of God, his personal character did not interfere with its being the times of the Gentiles, notwithstanding that God had put it into the heart of one of these Gentiles to favour His people. The word of God, by Jeremiah, is fulfilled. Babylon is judged, a characteristic event of all importance. But, in fact, that which still exists is a prolongation of its power. The seat of the royal authority which God bestows on man is a city which is not the city of God, which is neither the earthly Jerusalem nor the heavenly. The house of David no longer holds the sceptre entrusted to it.

The rod of the tribe of Judah preserved

It is true that the rod of the tribe of Judah is preserved, in order that "the Branch" of the root of Jesse may be presented to this tribe. But the power of the Gentiles still continues; it existed even when the Messiah was on the earth, and the Jews had to be commanded to render unto Caesar the things that were Caesar's. The presentation of Jesus, the true Messiah, was but the occasion of fully demonstrating this in the cry, "We have no king but Caesar."

Chapter 2

The family of God marked out: a numbered and recognized people

Nevertheless, God still gives the people — guilty under the law — an opportunity for the exercise of faith. Let us examine the principles that characterise the energy of the Holy Ghost in the people at the time of their return.

The first thing to be observed is that, having felt what it was to have to do with the Gentiles, and having experienced the power and wickedness of those whose help they had formerly sought (the unclean spirit was, in this respect, gone out of them), the children of the captivity resolve that Israel shall be an unmingled Israel, and proved to be so. They are most careful in verifying the genealogies of the people, and of the priests, in order that none but Israel should be engaged in the work. Formerly one priest succeeded another without previous examination; genealogy was not verified, and children came into their father's place in the enjoyment of the privileges which God had granted them. But Israel now, through the great grace of God, had to recover their position. This was neither the beginning of their

history, nor the power suited to the beginning; it was a return, and the disorder that sin had brought in was not henceforth to be endured. They were escaping from the fruits of it, at least in part. What had any but Israel to do there? To mark out the family of God was now the essential thing. Deliverance from Babylon was their deliverance. It was this family, or a small remnant of it, which God had brought, or was bringing, out from thence. Thus, even amongst those who had come back to Judea, whoever could not produce his genealogy was set aside; and every priest with whom this was the case was put away from the priesthood as polluted, whatever, as it appears, might be the reality of his qualification. Divine discernment might, perhaps, recognise them and their rights another day; but the people who had returned from captivity could not do so. They were a numbered and recognised people. They dwelt each in his own city. It was weakness, no priest with Urim and Thummim, but it was faithfulness.

Chapter 3

The altar built: the Word followed

In the seventh month,* the children of Israel gather themselves together at Jerusalem, each one going up from the place where he dwelt. The first thing which they do there, under the direction of Joshua and Zerubbabel, is to build the altar, to place themselves under the wings of the God of Israel, the sole Help and sole Protector of His people; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries. Their refuge is in God. Beautiful testimony of faith! precious effect of the state of trial and abasement they were in! Surrounded by enemies, the unwalled city is protected by the altar of her God erected by the faith of God's people; and she is in greater security than when she had her kings and her walls. Faith, strict in following the word, confides in the goodness of its God. This exactness in following the word characterised the Jews, at this time in several respects. We have seen it, chapter 2:59-63, where some could not shew their genealogy; we find it again here, chapter 3:2; and again in verse 4, on the occasion of the feast of tabernacles. Customs, traditions, all were lost. They were very careful not to follow the ways of Babylon. What had they left except the word? A condition like this gave it its full power. All this takes place before the house is built. It was faith seeking the will of God, although far from having set everything in order. We find, then, no attempt at doing without God those things which required a discernment that they did not possess. But with touching faith these Jews exercise piety towards God, worship God, and, as we may say, set Him in their midst, rendering Him that which duty required. They acknowledged God by faith; but until the Urim and Thummim should be there, they placed no one, on God's part, with the object of giving some competency to act for Him, in a position which required the exercise of God's authority. {* This was the month in which the blowing of trumpets took place — a figure of the restoration of Israel in the last days.}

The foundations of the temple laid with joy and tears

Having at length, brought together the materials which the king of Persia had granted them, the Jews begin to build the temple and lay its foundations. The joy of the people, generally, was great. This was natural and right. They praise Jehovah according to the ordinance of David, and sing, (how well it

became them now to do so!) "His mercy endures for ever." Nevertheless, the ancient men wept, for they had seen the former house, built according to the inspired direction of God. Alas! we understand this. He who now thinks of what the assembly {See Acts 2 and 4.} of God was at the first will understand the tears of these old men. This suited nearness to God. Farther off, it was right that joy, or at least the confused shout, which only proclaimed the public event, should be heard; for, in truth, God had interposed in His people's behalf.

Joy was in His presence and acceptable. Tears confessed the truth, and testified a just sense of what God had been for His people, and of the blessing they had once enjoyed under His hand. Tears recognised, alas! that which the people of God had been for God; and these tears were acceptable to Him. The weeping could not be discerned from the shout of joy; this was a truthful result, natural and sad, yet becoming in the presence of God. For He rejoices in the joy of His people, and He understands their tears. It was, indeed, a true expression of the state of things.

Chapter 4

Difficulties and snares

But, in such a case, difficulties do not arise only from the weakness of the remnant; they proceed, also, from elements with which the remnant are outwardly connected, and which, at the same time, are foreign to the relationship of God's people with Himself. In Israel's case, there was real weakness, because God — although faithful to His people according to their need — did not, in fact, come forward to establish them on the original footing. To do so would not have been morally suitable, either with respect to the position in which the people stood with God, or with regard to the power which He had established among the Gentiles apart from Israel, or with a view to the instruction of His own people in all ages as to the government of God. Relationship with God is never despised with impunity.

But besides this, in such a state of things the power of the world having gained so much ground already in the land of promise, even among the people to whom the promise belonged, difficulties arose from the fact that persons who, in consequence of the intervention of the civil powers, were within the borders of the promised land, desired to participate with the Jews in constructing the temple. They alleged, in support of their claim, that they called upon God as the Jews did, and had sacrificed unto Him since Esarhaddon had brought them into the land. This was not enmity. Why repel such a desire? The Spirit of God calls them the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin. The people of God — the assembly of God — ought to be conscious of their own peculiar privileges, and that they are the assembly of the Lord. The Lord loved Judah and Benjamin. From His grace towards this people flowed all the blessing of which they were the object; and the people were bound fully to recognise this grace. Not to recognise it was to despise it. Now this grace was the sovereign goodness of God. To admit strangers would have been insensibility to this grace as the only source of good; it would have been to lose it, and to say that they were not its objects according to the sovereign goodness of God, more than other persons of the world. But the faithfulness and intelligence of the chiefs among Israel delivered them from this snare. "We ourselves together," said they, "will build unto Jehovah the God of Israel." "Ye have nothing to do with us to build a house unto our God." In fact, it would have been to deny that

He was their God, the God of Israel. This is especially the case of the assembly when called to remember her privileges after long forgetfulness and painful chastisement. If God allow it for the trial or the chastening of His people, it is possible that the work may be stopped through the practices and the malice of those who will praise the great and noble Asnapper to the powers of the earth; before whom they will appear in their true earthly character, just as they assumed the garb of piety when seeking to insinuate themselves among the remnant of Israel. The power that belonged to God's people, at the time of their former independence, will alarm one who, not trusting in God, dreads the effect upon his own authority of the energy which the Spirit of God produces in the people of God independently of this authority, however submissive the people may be. Israel was acting here according to Cyrus's own decree; but this is of no avail. That which depends on God is absolute; that which does not depend on Him is arbitrary; but the faithful have nothing to do with all this. God may see that trial and chastening are needful to them.

Chapter 5

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah sent of God for encouragement

Whatever happens, they have to go through that which puts faith to the proof; but their path is ordered by the will of God, and their faith relies upon Him. In this case they had to wait; but God's time would come; and that, not by means of a mere decree from the Gentile king: God raises up a much more precious encouragement for them from another quarter. Although the people had been subject to the Gentiles, God was still supreme; His word is still of supreme authority to His people, whenever He condescends to speak to them. If necessary, He can dispose the hearts of kings to uphold it. In every case His people are to follow it, without seeking other motive, or other help. Haggai and Zechariah are sent of God, and prophesy among the people. These immediate communications from God were of infinite value, as His word ever is; and although they did not change the position of the people with respect to the Gentiles, they were a touching proof that God was interested in His people, and that, whatever might be their afflictions, the God of Israel was above all that had power to oppress them.

Want of faith the true hindrance to building

I have said that the people were obliged to wait. This was the case as soon as they received the decree that forbade their continuing to build. But many years had elapsed before this prohibition came; and it seems evident to me, from examining the prophecies which throw so much light on the contemporary history, and from comparing their dates, that it was want of faith in the remnant which was the true hindrance. There were adversaries in the land who made them afraid, and who thus prevented their building. It appears that the Jews did not dare continue. Their adversaries hired counsellors in the Persian court to frustrate the purpose of the Jews. But the first thing was that the adversaries weakened the hands of the people. It was not until two reigns later that the prohibition was obtained; but the Jews had left off building through fear of their adversaries (compare Ezra 4:4, 21, and Ezra 5:1, with Hag. 1:1-4; Hag. 2:15). Neither was it because the king's decree was brought them that they began again to build, but because they feared Jehovah, and feared not the king's command, as seeing Him who is

invisible (Hag. 1:12-13). God was not any more to be feared in the reign of Darius than in that of Cyrus or of Artaxerxes; but the source of their weakness was their having forgotten God. This makes manifest the great grace of God in awakening them by the mouth of Haggai. God had until then also chastened the people.

Chapter 6

The effect of faith: the intervention of their adversaries

All this shews us that, in ceasing to build the temple, Israel was in fault. It appears from Haggai (Hag. 2:15) that they had made no progress at all. The terror with which the adversaries had inspired the Jews had stopped them. They had no excuse for this, since even the king's commandment was on their side. That which they lacked was faith in God. We have seen that, when there was faith they dared to build, although there was a decree against it. The effect of this faith is to give rise to a decree in their favour, and that even through the intervention of their adversaries. It is good to trust in God. Blessed be His gracious name!

Under the influence of the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah the house was finished (Ezra 6:15).

The passover kept: Jehovah's kindness and grace

Jehovah's great grace in this was a real occasion for joy. The priests are set in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses, according to the law of Moses, and we find more faithfulness than in the best days of the kings (compare chap. 6: 20 with 2 Chron. 29:34). But we hear nothing of the ordinances of David, and a still greater deficiency is seen in their celebration of the feast of dedication. They kept the passover — a proof that the redemption of the people could be remembered in the land. Happy privilege of the restored remnant! Many also had joined them, separating themselves from the filthiness of the heathen of the land. Jehovah had given them cause for joy; but fire no longer came down from heaven to testify divine acceptance of the sacrifice offered for the dedication of the house. This was indeed a negative difference, but one of deep significance. And even that which formed the subject of their joy betrayed their condition. "Jehovah had turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel." It was great kindness and touching grace on His part. But what a change!

Chapters 7 and 8

Ezra sent to Jerusalem by the Gentile king

Alas! this was not the end of the history. God, in His goodness, must still watch over the unfaithfulness and the failures of His people, even when they are but a small remnant who by His grace have escaped from the ruin. He puts it into the heart of Ezra, a ready scribe in the law of Moses, to think of the remnant in Jerusalem, to seek the law of Jehovah, to teach it and cause it to be observed. Here again it is

still the Gentile king who sends him for this purpose to Jerusalem. All blessing is of God, but nothing (except prophecy, in which God was sovereign, as we have already seen in the case of Samuel at the time of the people's downfall), nothing in point of authority comes immediately from God. He could not pass by unrecognised the throne which He had Himself established among the Gentiles upon the earth. And Israel was an earthly people.

The good hand of God

The character of this intervention of God by Ezra's mission is, I think, a touching proof of His loving-kindness. It was exactly suited to the wants of the people. It was not power. That had been removed to another place. It was the knowledge of the will and the ordinances of God, — of the mind of God in the word. The king himself recognised this (Ezra 7:25). Guarded by the good hand of his God, this pious and devoted man goes up with many others to Jerusalem.

Chapters 9 and 10

Disobedience, followed by humiliation and confession

Alas! as soon as he can look into these things, he finds the law already broken, evil already come in. The people of Israel had not kept themselves separate from the people of the lands, and even the princes and rulers had been chief in this trespass. Ezra is confounded at this, and remains overwhelmed with grief the whole day. Can it be that the remnant, whom God had snatched, as it were, from the fire, have so soon forgotten the hand that delivered them, and married the daughters of a strange god? Those who trembled at Jehovah's word having assembled with him, Ezra humbles himself on account of it. At the time of the evening sacrifice, he pours out the deep sorrows of his heart before the Lord. A great multitude have their hearts touched by grace. There is no prophetic answer, as so often before had happened in similar circumstances; but there is an answer from God in the hearts of the guilty. "We have sinned," said one among them; "yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing." And they set themselves heartily to the work. Israel is summoned, each one under pain of exclusion, to come up to Jerusalem, and they assembled at the time of rain, for the matter was urgent; and the congregation acknowledge it to be their duty to conform to the law. Under the hand of Ezra, and by the diligence of those who were appointed to this work, it was accomplished in two months. As for all those who had taken strange wives, they gave their hand that they would put away their wives: they confessed their sin and offered a ram for this trespass.

Separation from all who are not the people of God

Once more we find that that which characterises the operation of the Spirit of God, and the intervention of God among His people, with respect to their walk and moral condition, is separation from all who are not the people of God as they were. Those of the priestly family who were unable to produce their genealogy had been excluded from the priesthood as polluted; and those among the people who were in the same case were not acknowledged. They positively refuse any participation in the work to the

people of the land who wished to join them in building the temple; and, finally, with respect to their own wives, several of whom had borne them children, they have to put them away, and to separate themselves, at whatever cost, from all that was not Israel. It is this which characterises faithfulness in a position like theirs; that is, a remnant come out from Babylon, and occupied in restoring the temple and service of God, according to that which yet remained to them.

God's unfailing comfort in His compassion

Moreover, we see that God did not fail to comfort them by His testimony — sweet and precious consolation! But the power of the Gentiles was there. That which appertained to authority and the throne at Jerusalem, and to the power of ordaining, which belonged to it, was not re-established. The public sanction of God was not granted. Nevertheless, God blessed the remnant of His people, when they were faithful; and the most prominent thing, and that which should dwell on our hearts, is the grace which, in the midst of such ruin, and in the presence of the Gentile throne set up through Israel's sin, could still bless His people, though acknowledging the Gentile throne, which God had established in judgment upon them. Their position is clearly and touchingly stated in Ezra 9:8-9.* {* Only for 'were' in verse 9, we must read 'are.'}

It is a solemn season, when God, in His compassion, encourages and sustains the little remnant of His people in the midst of their difficulties; and owns them, as far as possible, after the ruin which their unfaithfulness has brought upon them — such ruin that God had been constrained to say of them, Lo-ammi.

It is most afflicting to see the people, after such grace as this, plunging again into fresh unfaithfulness and departure from God. But such is God, and such is man.

God's everlasting mercy and His ways to the coming of Messiah

We must ever bear in mind that Israel was an earthly people, and their full place in blessing now* that of the seat of God's power in righteousness upon earth, so that their relationship to another power, now set up among the Gentiles, was peculiar. But, if this be borne in mind in the application of the contents to other circumstances, the instructions afforded by this book are extremely interesting, as exhibiting the principles of conduct in which faith is displayed in the difficulties connected with a partial restoration from a ruined state, the dependence on God by which man is sustained in the midst of these difficulties, God's own ways in respect to His servants, and the absence of all pretensions to re-establish what could not be set up in power. Besides this, we have to view the Book of Ezra as giving that peculiar display of God's mercy and ways which left the rod of Judah subsisting till Shiloh came. No Shechinah was in the temple; no Urim and Thummim with the priest. But there was a sovereign intervention of God in that mercy which endures for ever, so that occasion was given to Messiah's coming according to the promises made to the fathers. The judgment of the Gentile power of Babylon carried with it the witness of a better deliverance, but for this the full time of God's purposes was to be awaited. {* I say "now," because, till Samuel's time, Israel was called to be blessed in obedience under priesthood, God being their King. But after David's time in view of Christ, the nation became the seat

of God's power in righteousness, so far as it enjoyed the blessing.}