

EZRA, NEHEMIAH, ESTHER

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Chapter 1

Coming Out of Babylon

Two years after the fall of Babylon, Cyrus became ruler over the Persian empire. His accession marked the beginning of a great movement, which had been outlined in prophecy long before Cyrus himself was born. In the Divine plan, which gives to every man, small and great, his life work, Cyrus had been assigned his task. It was to rebuild the city and temple of Jerusalem, and to let the exiles of Israel go free from their captivity in Babylon. (Isaiah 46:28; 45:13)

The prophet Isaiah had named Cyrus as the one who should do this work, even before the captivity had commenced. Daniel, who was prime minister to Cyrus, understood the prophetic writings which foretold that, at the end of seventy years, Israel should return to their own land, (Daniel 9:2) and he would have opportunity to show the king that which was foretold of him. Cyrus obeyed the word, and in his first year issued a proclamation, to every part of his kingdom, declaring that: "The Lord God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and He has charged me to build Him a house at Jerusalem." (Ezra 1:2)

The proclamation went on to invite the people of Jehovah to return to Jerusalem and engage in the work of rebuilding the temple.

It is evident from the record that the influence of Daniel's godly life had not been lost on the people whom he helped to govern. It had won for him and the truth he represented warm friends in every part of the kingdom. This was seen when Cyrus called upon his subjects to further the restoration by rendering the needed assistance to all who desired to return to Jerusalem, and to furnish the travelers with gold and silver, and goods and beasts, "beside the freewill offering for the house of God." (Ezra 1:4)

The proclamations which had been sent out by Nebuchadnezzar and Darius, declaring the power and greatness of Jehovah, as manifested in Daniel's behalf, had spread the knowledge of God. Now when the call was made on the people to help "them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the Lord," (Ezra 1:5) we read that: "All they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all that was willingly offered." (Ezra 1:6)

When God requires a work to be done, He provides the means. While He was raising the spirit of His people to go up to Jerusalem to build a house for Him, He was also at work on the hearts of the people about them, raising the necessary funds. There is a lesson in this for Christian workers. If we yield ourselves to do God's will, and be sure that it is indeed His work that we undertake, we may rest in the assurance that God will supply all our need.

Cyrus also brought out from his treasure-house, five thousand four hundred vessels of gold and silver, which had been originally taken from the temple at Jerusalem. It was not a light thing for a king thus to strip his treasure-house, and the hearty way in which all took hold of the matter showed that a real work had been done for king and people.

The departure from Babylon recalls to mind the exodus from Egypt fifteen hundred years before. But how different were the circumstances! Then, the movement had been carried out in the face of Pharaoh's opposition, and against the strength of Egypt. Now Cyrus was heartily supporting Israel's journey to Jerusalem, and the resources of its empire were placed at their command.

Yet only a handful of people, comparatively, went up to Jerusalem, numbering some fifty thousand. The remainder preferred to stay where they were and to merge themselves and their interests with the world around them, rather than face the hardship and uncertainty involved in a return to the ruins of Jerusalem.

When Israel first came out of Egypt, they were not really delivered from the house of bondage because their hearts were still there. This was why they did not enter into rest. They were still in bondage, and most of them died without entering into rest. It is little profit to have the body come out of Egypt and leave the heart in.

In bringing His people out of the captivity of Babylon, the Lord desired to give them a perfect freedom, of soul as well as body. So

all were left to come out or to stay in. None could be really set free, so long as the very thing that caused them to go into captivity was allowed to enslave their hearts. God was doing a deeper and more lasting work than merely to strike fetters of iron from the limbs of His people. So we are not to judge of the success of this work by the few that then heard the call and came out.

As we read the prophecies of Isaiah, concerning the work of Cyrus, we can see that these go on to speak of the work of Jesus, of whom Cyrus was a type. It is Christ who alone can build God's eternal city, and let go His captives, for only He can set men free from the bondage of sin. He is the Good Shepherd who shall perform of God's pleasure. "He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, You shall be built; and to the temple, Your foundation shall be laid." (Isaiah 44:28)

In the departure from Babylon, in the days of Cyrus, we see the beginning of a work which is not yet completed, and which will not cease until God's people are all set free from every species of spiritual bondage. In the closing call of the Gospel, we find God's last appeal to His people to come out of Babylon. "And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that you be not partakers of her sins, and that you receive not of her plagues." (Revelation 18:4)

But although Christ is the real deliverer, we may have a part in His work, just as Cyrus had. God is no respecter of persons, and to

us, if we will receive it, He gives the commission to set the captives free and break every yoke. "He whom the Lord loves shall perform His pleasure on Babylon. And His arm shall be on the Chaldeans. I, even I, have spoken, yea, I have called him; I have brought him, and he shall make his way prosperous." (Isaiah 48:14-15,RV, margin)

If we will allow God to speak and live through us the same irresistible power which wrought through Cyrus, and made the lofty walls and brazen gates of Babylon an ineffectual defense against his attacks, will work through us to the casting down of strongholds, and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God. (2 Corinthians 10:4-5) The promise given to Cyrus is just as much for us, "I will go before you and make the rugged places plain; I will break in pieces the doors of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron; and I will give you the treasures of darkness." (Isaiah 45:2)

The souls of men, Satan's treasure, shall be wrested from him by those who fight the good fight of faith.

The kingdom of Babylon bares rule over all the earth, and the work of restoration will not be completed until God's true people are gathered from every tribe and kindred, and people and nation. The work to be done for these is set forth in the 49th chapter of Isaiah. The Lord says, speaking to His servant, "I will preserve you, and give you for a covenant of the people...to make them inherit the desolate heritages; Saying to them that are bound, Go forth; to them that are in darkness, Show yourselves. ... And I will make all my mountains a way, and my highways shall be exalted. Lo, these shall

come from far: and, lo, these from the north and from the west; and these from the land of Sinim." (Isaiah 49:8-9,11-12,RV)

The land of Sinim is China. That country, like many another, seems walled in by impenetrable prejudices, but it must be remembered by those who take up the work commenced by Cyrus, that they have the same promise that was made to him: "I will break in pieces the doors of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron." (Isaiah 45:2)

But those who desire to have a part in the grand consummation of the Gospel work, and to claim these promises, must live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. When a man rejects any part of God's Word, he does not really believe even that part which he thinks he is accepting. Every word of God is infinite, and any particular scripture, before it can be appreciated and understood, must be taken with every other word given to man.

No man can set others free who is bound himself. The first thing for one who would deliver others from Babylon, which is the kingdom of Satan, is to come out of it himself. And no man can come out alone. Whoever is content to leave a single soul in its bondage, shows that he himself is not free from the selfishness which is its vital principle.

The vessels of the house of God were also taken to Babylon, by Nebuchadnezzar, just as the ark had been taken by the Philistines centuries before. As the ark, when placed in the house of Dagon

vindicated the majesty of Jehovah above false gods, so when Belshazzar brought forth the vessels of God's house, wherein he and his lords might drink wine to the gods of silver, iron and stone, that very hour the fingers of a man's hand traced his death sentence on his palace wall.

Cyrus restored the vessels to those who returned to Jerusalem, but the sacred things which those vessels represented, remained in Babylon, for we read of their removal at a future time, when all the nations shall see the Lord's arm made bare, and behold His salvation. "Depart, depart, go out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go out of the midst of her; be clean, you that bear the vessels of the Lord." (Isaiah 52:11)

God's people are His holy vessels, (1 Corinthians 3:17) and until they recognize this, and acknowledge Him in all their ways, counting themselves dead indeed, they are still in Babylon. When the Lord gets entire control of human beings, He can do what He pleases in a way that other human beings cannot fail to understand, and thus He can "make bare His holy arm in the sight of all the nations." (Isaiah 52:10)

The things of God are foolishness to the natural man, but when the Word of God is made flesh, and translated into every day life, even the flesh can see its working. So we see that those who would have a part in God's great worldwide work must first be clean themselves. This the Word will do for them, when they let it. "Now you are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you."

(John 15:3) "That He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That He might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." (Ephesians 5:26-27)

There is one important fact which must not be overlooked in this connection. Israel went into captivity because of their Sabbath-breaking. Jeremiah states this, (Jeremiah 17:19-27) and the same thing is repeated in 2 Chronicles 3:6; 20:21, where the reason is given why the captivity was just seventy years in length. It was because the land, and therefore, of course, the people, had not kept the Sabbath.

Now this being so, it is evident that no one can escape from the real spiritual bondage of Babylon unless he has ceased to commit the sin of Sabbath-breaking, and it is equally clear that all who come out of Babylon, at the call of God, will come out as Sabbath-keepers. They will not observe the false Sabbath,--the Sunday,--which owes its origin to the king of Babylon,--Satan,--but will keep the true Lord's day, the Sabbath of the Lord their God. They will bear the sign of God, which is only placed upon those who are His own handiwork, having ceased from their own works and entered into rest. This rest remains for all, ever since God ceased from His own works, and entered into rest on the seventh day. (Hebrews 4:9-10)

Babylon from the beginning has stood for man's works directed against God, and its mark is the most presumptuous of them all, an

attempt to substitute a man-made Sabbath for God's own rest day. The Sabbath, on the other hand, calls men to show faith in a living God, by ceasing from their own works. The Sabbath can only be kept by faith, and those who thus keep it share God's works, and bear the seal of the living God.

We see, therefore, that since in these days God is calling His people out of Babylon, He must also of necessity call them to observe the Sabbath according to His commandment, and thus show their faith in the sufficiency of His power to make them righteous and sustain their life.

Yet because this calls for the exercise of faith, many who claim to live by faith, draw back on the ground that they would lose their living if they should keep the seventh day Sabbath. But they miss the point altogether. God is not calling them to starve, but to come out of Babylon. In Ezra's rest time, doubtless many thought that they would starve if they should leave their home and business in Babylon, yet we do not read of any starving because they obeyed the call. On the contrary, they were immediately made stewards of great wealth for the cause of God, "vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things." (Ezra 1:6)

Much more will this be the case in the final departure from Babylon. "The abundance of the sea shall be converted unto you, the wealth of the nations shall come unto you." (Isaiah 60:5)

Then it was only Cyrus who helped the movement, but at its consummation we read, "Kings shall be your nursing fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers; they shall bow down to you with their faces to the earth, and lick the dust of your feet." (Isaiah 49:23) "Go forth of Babylon, flee from the Chaldeans; with a voice of singing declare, tell this, utter it even to the end of the earth; say, The Lord has redeemed His servant Jacob. And they thirsted not when He led them through the deserts: He caused the waters to flow out of the rock for them: He clave the rock also, and the waters gushed out." (Isaiah 48:20-21)--Present Truth, August 17, 1899--Notes on the International Sunday-School Lessons--Ezra 1:1-11

E.J. Waggoner

Chapter 2

The Second Temple

The glorious kingdom of Babylon had fallen, and the kingdom of the Medes and Persians had taken its place. The captivity of Babylon that was laid upon Judah was now to be broken. The great Nebuchadnezzar had carried away all the people of the land, except a few of the very poorest, to Babylon, "where they were servants to him and his sons until the reign of the kingdom of Persia: To fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths: for as long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfill threescore and ten years." (2 Chronicles 36:20-21)

One hundred and six years before they were carried to Babylon, Isaiah had not only said that they should be carried away, but had also said that they should return, and that the temple and Jerusalem should be rebuilt. One hundred and seventy-four years before the feast of Belshazzar and the fall of Babylon, Isaiah had written of both, and of Cyrus in his capture of the city. Thus he called Cyrus by name more than a hundred years before he was born. Then it was that the prophet wrote: "That says of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure; even saying to Jerusalem, You shall be built; and to the temple, your foundation shall be laid." (Isaiah 44:28) "Thus says the Lord to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have held, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut; ... He shall build my city, and he shall let go

my captives, not for price nor reward, says the Lord." (Isaiah 45:1,13)

Although Isaiah had prophesied the captivity, he had not said how long it should be. Jeremiah told that it should be seventy years. In the year 606 BC, the first captivity was made, when among those taken was Daniel. Then, exactly when the seventy years ended--536 BC--Cyrus issues his proclamation for the return of the captives to their own land, to build the temple of the Lord. And this is a copy of the proclamation: "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth has the Lord God of heaven given me; and He has charged me to build him a house in 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 remains in any place where he sojourns, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem." (Ezra 1:1-4)

"The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus." How did the Lord do this? By His angels. In Daniel 10, we read of a time in the third year of Cyrus, when Daniel was greatly concerned about something in

connection with the cause of God, and he fasted and mourned and prayed, "three full weeks." (Daniel 10:2)

At the end of the three weeks, as he was by the River Tigris, a glorious angel stood before him and said, "Fear not, Daniel; for from the first day that you did set your heart to understand, and to chasten yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I am come for your words." (Daniel 10:12)

If, then, Daniel's words were heard the first day, what could have delayed the angel "three full weeks"? He tells: "But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me one and twenty days;" (Daniel 10:13) exactly the length of time Daniel had been seeking the knowledge which the angel was to give him. That is, the king of Persia was to have some part in the answer to Daniel's prayers; and the angel had to go to the court of Cyrus, and, by exerting his holy influence there, to bring about the events through which Daniel's prayer could be answered. And when the angel was to leave Daniel, he said, "Now will I return to fight with the prince of Persia." (Daniel 10:20)

Read the 10th chapter of Daniel entire.

Cyrus, however, was not the first king of the Medo-Persian power after the fall of Babylon. In Daniel 5, it is said, "In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain. And Darius the Median took the kingdom, being about threescore and two years old." (Daniel 5:30)

And in Daniel 11, the same angel of the 10th chapter says, "Also I in the first year of Darius the Mede, even I stood to confirm and to strengthen him." (Daniel 11:1)

Darius reigned two years, when he died, and Cyrus succeeded to the kingdom; and as the angel stood with Darius the Mede, and with Cyrus in his third year, to influence him so that Daniel's prayer could be answered, it is certain that it was by the influence of His holy angel that the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus to let go the captive people of God. "He has charged me to build Him a house at Jerusalem." (Ezra 1:2)

How did Cyrus learn that God had charged him to do this? Daniel was in the court of the kingdom of Babylon during the whole of the captivity; and when Babylon had fallen, and Darius the Mede had taken the kingdom, he says: "In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of the seed of the Medes, which was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans; In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem." (Daniel 9:1,2)

Then when Cyrus came to the throne in 536 BC, at the expiration of the seventy years, it is certain that Daniel showed him the word of God by Isaiah saying: "Thus says the Lord to Cyrus whose right hand I have held, to subdue nations before him, ... He shall build my city, and he shall let go my captives." (Isaiah 45:1,13)

Thus Cyrus knew that God had charged him to build him a house.

In answer to the proclamation made by Cyrus, there were 42,360 people, besides their servants and their maids that numbered 7,337, and 200 singing men and singing women--49,897 in the whole company--who returned to Jerusalem. Joshua the son of Jozadak was high priest and Zerubbabel was appointed governor. When they reached Jerusalem, they immediately set up "the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon. ... From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings unto the Lord. But the foundation of the temple of the Lord was not yet laid." (Ezra 3:2,6)

Then the chief of the fathers "offered freely for the house of God, to set it upon his place. They gave after their ability unto the treasure of the work." (Ezra 2:68-69)

The amount of these gifts was about \$500,000, an average of ten dollars for each person--man, woman, child, servant, and maid--in the whole company.--PP Editor's note: multiply these values x33 to get the equivalent 2024 value. But the merit of the service was that they gave it "freely" and of "their ability," and the blessing of the Lord, in abundance, came upon both their gifts and them. "For God loves a cheerful giver," (2 Corinthians 8:12) and, "If there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man has, and not according to that he has not." (2 Corinthians 9:7)

We do not wonder that "When the builders laid the foundation of the temple, the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid." (Ezra 3:10-11)

They had given freely of their ability, and they had a right to rejoice. When the first temple was to be built, the people offered willingly. "Then the people rejoiced, for that they offered willingly, because with perfect heart they offered willingly to the Lord; and David the king also rejoiced with great joy." (1 Chronicles 29:9)

If there were more, and more cheerful, more willing, giving to the cause of God, there would be more genuine rejoicing in God and in His truth. Try it. "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35) "God does love a cheerful giver." (2 Corinthians 9:7)--Signs of the Times, February 11, 1886--Notes on the International Lesson, February 21--Ezra 1:1-4; 3:8-13

A.T. Jones

Chapter 3

Rebuilding the Temple

At the return of the Jews to Babylon, each family went to its own city and dwelt there. In the seventh month of the year however, "the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem," (Ezra 3:1) and an altar was erected on which they might offer their burnt offerings. At that time the foundation of the temple was not laid, but steps were taken to prepare the necessary material, and, seven months later, the builders commenced operations, under the oversight of the priests and Levites.

When the foundation stones were laid, there was great rejoicing among the people. Musical instruments were brought, and songs of praise and thanksgiving arose to God, "because He is good, for His mercy endures for ever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout." (Ezra 3:11)

It was indeed an occasion for thanksgiving that God had not cast off His people, but had again delivered them out of the hand of their enemies. Another chance was being given to Israel to be unto God a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, exalted high above all other peoples as the children of the Most High, "a wise and understanding nation." (Deuteronomy 4:6)

We may learn a lesson from Israel's joy on this occasion. To outward appearance their situation was not an enviable one. Hostile

nations were all around them, and they themselves were poor and few in number. How came they to be shouting for joy? It was the blessing of the Lord that brought the rejoicing, and they had opened the way for the blessing to come by their liberality in contributing to the erection of the temple. Although Cyrus had undertaken to meet the expenses, the people desired to have their part in the work, and they offered freely for the house of God according to their ability: "And some of the chief of the fathers, when they came to the house of the Lord which is at Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God to set it up in his place: They gave after their ability unto the treasure of the work threescore and one thousand drams of gold, and five thousand pound of silver, and one hundred priests' garments." (Ezra 2:68-69)

The times of greatest rejoicing in Israel's history had been the occasions when they gave freely of their substance to the work of God.

The Gospel calls upon men to show liberality of spirit, not because its object is to impoverish its recipients, but because God gives everything freely. We are called to be channels of the manifold grace of God, and we never can give it away as fast as God will pour it into us. The only reason why men lack is because they refuse to be channels to others. God tells why some are cursed. It is because they rob Him of His own. "Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed me. But you say, Wherein have we robbed you? In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse: for you have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring all the tithes into the

storehouse, that there may be meat in my house, and prove me now herewith, says 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." (Malachi 3:8-10)

So if we would find comfort in adversity, and joy in tribulation, let us open our hearts as Israel did, and remember God's claims on us, and bless the poor and the needy. "Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to deal your bread to the hungry, and that you bring the poor that are cast out to your house? when you see the naked, that you cover him; and that you hide not yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth as the morning, and your health shall spring forth speedily: and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your reward. Then shall you call, and the Lord shall answer; you shall cry, and He shall say, Here I am. If you take away from the midst of you the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity; And if you draw out your soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall your light rise in obscurity, and your darkness be as the noonday: And the Lord shall guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and make fat your bones: and you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not." (Isaiah 58:6-11)

Yet while many shouted aloud for joy, there were some among the people, "ancient men, that had seen the first house," (Ezra 3:12)

who wept with a loud voice as they thought of the old-time splendor of the temple. Their lamentation was so loud "that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people." (Ezra 3:13)

The old men may have been wrong in allowing themselves to cast a cloud of discouragement over the day's rejoicings, but it may be too, that the younger generation needed to be reminded of the evil that had befallen their backsliding fathers. The Lord deals tenderly with all, and He declared later by His prophets to those who lovingly recalled the glories of the earlier temple, "Who is left among you that saw this house in her first glory? and how do ye see it now? is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing? Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; and be strong, O Joshua, son of Josedech, the high priest; and be strong, all you people of the land, says the Lord, and work: for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts: According to the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, so my spirit remains among you: fear not. For thus says the Lord of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; And I will shake all nations, and the Desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is my, and the gold is my, says the Lord of hosts. The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, says the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace, says the Lord of hosts." (Haggai 2:3-9)

The Desire of all nations should come and fill it with His glory. The discontented were warned by another prophet not to despise the day of small things. "For who has despised the day of small things? for they shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel with those seven; they are the eyes of the Lord, which run to and fro through the whole earth." (Zechariah 4:9)

Satan was determined to thwart, if he could, the re-establishment of God's people in their own land. He had rejoiced to see Jerusalem laid low and its people go into captivity. His feelings are expressed in the rejoicing of Tyre. "Aha, she is broken that was the gates of the people: she is turned unto me: I shall be replenished, now she is laid waste." (Ezekiel 26:2)

Satan himself was the king of Tyrus as plainly appears from Ezekiel 28:11-19, and so expected to have complete control over the earth, now that he had gained the victory over the one nation which withstood him. But in the captivity of His people, God's strength had been made perfect in weakness, and He had won for himself a glorious name. Now that Satan saw Israel returning to Jerusalem, he set himself once more to the work of their destruction.

The adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity built the temple of the God of Israel, and they came to offer their services. They claimed to worship the true God, and said that they had sacrificed unto Him since the days that Esar-Haddon, king of Assyria, had brought them to the cities of Samaria. But the superstitious character of their perverted worship can be

seen from the record in: "And the king of Assyria brought men from Babylon, and from Cuthah, and from Ava, and from Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel: and they possessed Samaria, and dwelt in the cities thereof. ... So these nations feared the Lord, and served their graven images, both their children, and their children's children: as did their fathers, so do they unto this day." (2 Kings 17:24,41)

The Lord had warned Israel not to enter into relations with the surrounding peoples, because they had made the land unclean, from one end to the other, with the filthiness of their abominations. "The land, unto which you go to possess it, is an unclean land with the filthiness of the people 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, neither take their daughters unto your sons, nor seek their peace or their wealth for ever: that you may be strong, and eat the good of the land, and leave it for an inheritance to your children for ever." (Ezra 9:11-12)

Zerubbabel and the rest of the fathers of Israel acted on this instruction and refused to allow the people of the land to co-operate with them. Then these showed their true colors, by opposing the work all they could, hiring counselors at the Persian court to frustrate the purpose of Israel, and writing complaints to the king.

Satan's most deadly devices often come in the guise of offers of friendly assistance. But if we hold fast to the Word of God, and

make no move that He does not command, it will not be long before the cloven hoof of the tempter will show itself, as it did on this occasion.

It will be noticed that when Israel repulsed the offer of their would-be allies, they rested their position on the commission given to them by Cyrus. We might wonder that they did not take higher ground, but it was true that they were as much the servants of Cyrus as ever. They recognized this. Ezra in his prayer, recorded in the 9th chapter, said, "For we are bondmen; yet our God has not forsaken us in our bondage, but has extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia." (Ezra 9:9,RV) and Nehemiah confessed also, "Behold, we are servants this day, and as for the land that You gave unto our fathers to eat the fruit thereof and the good thereof, behold we are servants in it. And it yields much increase unto the kings whom You have set over us because of our sins: also they have power over our bodies, and over our cattle, at their pleasure, and we are in great distress." (Nehemiah 9:36-37)

In all this God's infinite patience and long-suffering stand out. Since His people would not serve Him in prosperity, He goes with them into poverty and servitude. "In all their affliction He was afflicted." (Isaiah 63:9) "[He] delivered His strength into captivity, and His glory into the adversary's hand." (Psalm 78:61)

He desired to have a throne among a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, but He had to be content with an enslaved, backsliding and despised people. Yet, for all this, He did not forsake them.

No matter how low we fall, we may know that God has not cast us off, and that even in the depths of sin and misery, He is able to make known "the exceeding greatness of His power toward those who believe." (Ephesians 1:19)

So let no one think that God cannot do a great work for such as him, for He has chosen to hamper himself with every possible phase of human weakness in order that He may display to men how strong He is to save. The base and despised are His elect. "For you see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, has God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in His presence." (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

There is one most important feature about this period of Bible history with which every Christian should be acquainted. The time of "the going forth of the commandment to restore and build Jerusalem," (Daniel 9:25) marks the commencement of a prophetic period, revealed to Daniel, (Daniel 9:24-27) which gives the time of Christ's first advent. Seventy weeks are mentioned, divided into three portions,--seven weeks, sixty-two weeks, and one week. In prophecy, a day stands for a year, so that the full term here brought view is one of 490 years.

Now it is important to fix the date of the going forth of the commandment to restore and build Jerusalem, for from this point the years must be reckoned. Without going into details, it is clear that the command was not fully given until the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, (See Ezra 7) which was 457 BC. The Scripture (Ezra 6:14) shows that the decree of Artaxerxes must be included in the commandment. Therefore in 457 BC, the 490 years began. In seven weeks, or 49 years, the city of Jerusalem was rebuilt. Another sixty-two weeks equal 434 days, or 434 years, and Messiah appeared on the same in 27 AD. In the midst of the last week, after three and a half year's ministry, He was "cut off, but not for himself, and in another three and a half years, the period closed with the stoning of Stephen and the preaching of the Gospel in every direction." (Daniel 9:26)

We saw, in the last lesson, that the restoration of the temple under Cyrus was but the beginning of a great work which Christ was to do for His holy temple, the church. To Daniel was revealed the time when Christ would come, "to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness." (Daniel 9:24)

In a previous vision he had seen how long the sanctuary of God should be defiled and trodden under foot. It was to be for 2,300 days, or years. (Daniel 8:14) Both of the periods we have mentioned refer to the same subject, and both begin at the same time, 457 BC. The 2,300 years, therefore, ended in 1844. Then began the work of the cleansing of the sanctuary.

What took place in 1844? Great light began to shine into the hearts of many at that time from the prophetic Word, and many rejoiced in the discovery that the coming of the Lord was nigh. They saw the importance of being sanctified through the truth, and living by every word of God.

At this very time, the three angels' messages of Revelation 14, which are to be proclaimed just before the second coming of Christ, (Revelation 14:7-16) began to be studied and understood, and one of those declare, that Babylon is fallen, and all must come out of her. As we saw last week, these who come out of Babylon must be observers of God's Sabbath, and in that very year of 1844, light came on the Sabbath truth, and many began the observance of the seventh day.

From that time to this, the Word of God has been opening more and more, and its purifying power has been working on men's hearts, to make them meet temples for the Spirit of God, cleansing the sanctuary. It is true that men have been slow of heart to believe, but because God has waited to be gracious for so many years, let no reader conclude that it was a mistake to believe that the end of all things is at hand. Let him rather "account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation," (2 Peter 3:15) and see that he cause no delay himself by refusing to walk in the light that comes to him. Meantime, the message of the everlasting Gospel with its final appeal to men, is encircling the earth, and it will not be long before

the Israel of God will be gathered from all places where they have been driven. (Jeremiah 29:14; 40:12)

Remember that when the Jews left Babylon in the days of Cyrus, they were a feeble and despised people, yet the arm of their God was not shortened, and although they were confronted with hardship and contempt, yet their lot was more to be desired than that of any people on the earth.

So now, although the wealthy and the learned turn away from God's call to come out of Babylon, rest in His power, and be sanctified through His truth, so that only the humble and despised are connected with the message, it will be better to share the reproach of Christ than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. (Hebrews 11:25) "Fear God, and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment is come." (Revelation 14:7)--Present Truth, August 24, 1899--Notes on the International Sunday-School Lessons--Ezra 3:10; 4:5

E.J. Waggoner

Chapter 4

A Lesson from Ezra

In the action of Ezra as he was about to go up to Jerusalem to rebuild the city, there is a lesson for those who at the present time are asking the aid of civil authority in favor of Sunday observance.

He had received permission from the king to go up to Jerusalem, and had gathered together a company of his people for that purpose. But the country to which they were to pass was hostile, and they were not men of war, and could not defend themselves. The king was well-disposed toward them, and would no doubt have given them a guard of soldiers if they had desired it. But Ezra would not ask help from the king; for, said he: "I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and the 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." (Ezra 8:22)

Ezra knew that if he should ask for assistance, the king would think that the Lord was not with them, or else that they were afraid to trust Him. So he proclaimed a fast, that they might afflict themselves before God, to seek of Him the right way. "Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of Him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance." (Ezra 8:21)

And the result is summed up in these words: "So we fasted and besought our God for this: and He was intreated of us." (Ezra 8:23)

If Ezra had not been convinced that he was doing the work of the Lord, he would not have trusted in the Lord, but would have asked the assistance of the king. In every instance where people ask for human protection in matters pertaining to religion, it is because there is a belief in their hearts that the Lord is not with them. If there was Bible evidence of the sacredness of Sunday, would its friends ask for a human law in its favor? Never.

God has intrusted His truth to men, for them to disseminate, but He has never authorized them to use carnal weapons in its behalf. The commission is to "teach all nations"; (Matthew 28:19) but it is not said that the disciples must force all nations to believe. If anything is really of God, all man has to do is to observe it, and teach it, calling on the Lord for help, and the Spirit of God will convict men of sin.

If the advocates of Sunday observance really believe that it is of God, let them teach it with all diligence, asking God to guide them. If it is of God, He will not let it suffer, but will vindicate His truth.

But when they ask the aid of politicians,--worldly men,--these men will help them from worldly considerations, and not as a matter of religion. They will not believe that God is in the movement; but they will identify themselves with it, because they will expect to

derive personal advantage from it. And this is the only consideration that will move politicians and men of the world; so that if the movement really were of God, it would be dishonored by such advocacy.

God is able to take care of His own truth and people, without the aid of weak and sinful man.--Signs of the Times, February 15, 1883--Ezra 8:21-23

E.J. Waggoner

Chapter 5

Ezra's Journey to Jerusalem

For seventy years the city of Jerusalem, with its temple, had lain desolate, in fulfillment of the word of the Lord by the mouth of the prophet Jeremiah. This desolation was a striking evidence of the result of Sabbath-breaking, and also by contrast of the blessings which true Sabbath-keeping ensures; for if the Israelites had been faithful in the observance of the Sabbath, the city would have stood for ever. "And it shall come to pass, if you diligently hearken unto me, says the Lord, to bring in no burden through the gates of this city on the sabbath day, but hallow the sabbath day, to do no work therein; Then shall there enter into the gates of this city kings and princes sitting upon the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they, and their princes, the men of Judah, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: and this city shall remain for ever." (Jeremiah 17:24-25)

No enemy could have done anything against it. As it was, Jerusalem fell, not because of the superior force of the enemies that besieged it, but by its own weight, since it had rejected the Arm that was its defense and support.

But although Israel had rejected God, He had not cast off His people. Even before the fall of Jerusalem, God had foretold its restoration, and had named the man who should fulfill His pleasure in that respect. Soon after the beginning of the captivity this

message came: "Thus says the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon, I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end." (Jeremiah 29:10-11)

It was God himself who gave Jerusalem into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, (Daniel 1:1-2; Jeremiah 27:1-7) and He did it as the very best thing that could be done for its people. In allowing calamity to come upon them, God had only thoughts of good for them. There are no accidents in the history of this world. "[God] works all things after the counsel of His own will." (Ephesians 1:11)

Men imagine that they are the makers of history, and that by their counsels and their skill they make and unmake kingdoms; but the truth is that: "The Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomsoever He will." (Daniel 4:25,32) "He removes kings, and sets up kings." (Daniel 2:21)

Not the smallest and seemingly most insignificant thing takes place without His knowledge and consent. "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered." (Matthew 10:29-30)

The nations may chafe and rage under God's rule, desiring to break the power of His Government, but God will only laugh at their vain struggles. (Psalm 2:1-4) They may hate the righteous, and plot their destruction; but they can have no power except what is given them from heaven. (John 19:9-10) It is therefore to God, and not to any human power, that the people of God are to look for help and protection.

Many years before his birth, and while the temple at Jerusalem was standing in all its splendor, and the city was glorying in its independence, God had named Cyrus, King of Persia, as the one whom He would use as His instrument in the restoration of the city Jerusalem and its temple after the destruction. (See Isaiah 44:24-28; 45:1-4) Accordingly, "In the first year of Cyrus, King of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, King of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus says Cyrus, King of Persia, The Lord God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and He has 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." (Ezra 1:1-3)

Cyrus himself recognized that in this act he was but the agent of the King of kings.

For a time the work went forward rapidly; but soon the enemies of Israel began to interfere. First they asked to be allowed to help in the work, but this was not allowed. (Ezra 4:1-3) The favor of the enemies of the Gospel is worse than their open opposition. Unconverted men in the church are a thousand-fold more dangerous to its prosperity than they could possibly be if fighting it from without.

Unfortunately the builders of the temple did not hold fast the beginning of their confidence, but allowed their adversaries to weaken their hands. The Jews had a direct decree from King Cyrus, to restore the city and temple, and this decree could not be changed even by the king himself. (See Daniel 6:8,9,13,16) Moreover, they did not receive any contrary decree from the king to whom their adversaries wrote false reports. These adversaries simply received permission to command the Jews to cease work, and the Jews yielded to their power. (Ezra 4:7-24)

That the work of building might have gone on in spite of this opposition, is evident from the fact that in the second year of Darius, under the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah, the Jews again began to build, without any further royal decree. The word of the Lord, which had been their warrant in the first place, was sufficient authority. Again their enemies sought to restrain them, and would doubtless have been as successful as before, if the Jews had not been emboldened by the prophets of God. "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." (Ezra 5:5)

Then search was made, and the original decree was found, in consequence of which Darius issued a decree to the adversaries of the Jews to "Let the work of the house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God in his place. Moreover I make a decree that you shall do to the elders of these Jews for the building of the house of God; that of the king's goods, even of the tribute beyond the river, forthwith expenses be given to these men that they be not hindered." (Ezra 6:7-8)

Thus the wrath of man was made to praise God, and it was demonstrated that all efforts against the truth can result only in its advancement. From this time the work of restoration went forward, although of course the minds of the evil-disposed ones were not at all changed.

In the seventh year of Artaxerxes, Ezra, a scribe of the law, was commissioned by the king to go up and complete the work, and was given full power and unlimited command of all necessary funds. It is worthy of remark, however, that in every decree made by the kings of Persia, the God of heaven was especially named as the One whose orders they were carrying out. We have read the decree of Cyrus. Darius, in commanding the adversaries to abstain from hindering the work, referred to God in almost every sentence, and said in closing: "And the God that has caused His name to dwell there, destroy all kings and people that shall put to their hand to alter it to destroy the house of God which is at Jerusalem." (Ezra 6:12)

So likewise Artaxerxes said in his letter to Ezra, "Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done for the house of the God of heaven; for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons?" (Ezra 7:23)

And so Ezra, accompanied by a great company of Jews, found himself on the way to Jerusalem. The river Ahava was appointed as the rallying place, and there he halted for three days to view the people.

But there still were many enemies who, although forbidden to interfere with the work of building, would gladly steal upon the company of men, women, and children, and cut them off and plunder their camp. This they could do without their identity being known, and thus they could as effectually hinder the work as before. So we come to the words which contain the substance of this lesson. These are the words of Ezra: "Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of Him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance. For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way; because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him; but His power and His wrath is against all them that forsake Him. So we fasted and besought our God for this: and He was entreated of us." (Ezra 8:21-23)

What a grand thing it would be if there were more of that same shame now in the leaders of the church. Then, instead of Governments thinking that they are the supporters and protectors of religion, they would know that the ambassadors of Christ are clothed with power infinitely greater than theirs. Every request made by the church and its leaders for Government protection to missionaries, or for any kind of support is a denial of their claim that they are servants of the God who is above all. That which God himself stirred the king up to do, Ezra would accept as coming from God; but he would not ask armed protection. He knew that "It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes." (Psalm 118:9)

And he was not disappointed. The account ends thus: "Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go unto Jerusalem; and the hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way." (Ezra 8:31) "The angel of the Lord encamps round about them that fear Him, and delivers them." (Psalm 34:7)

Notice that the hand of God was upon them, and thus they were delivered. It is common to suppose that the hand of God upon one means some punishment, but we may see that it means deliverance. Therefore whoever can say with the full assurance of faith: "You compass my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but lo, O Lord, You know it all together. You have beset me behind and before, and laid your hand upon me," (Psalm 139:3-5) can also say, "The Lord is on

my side; I will not fear: what can man do unto me?" (Psalm 118:6)--
Present Truth, October 12, 1899--Notes on the International Sunday-
School Lessons--Subtitle: A Lesson of Truth in God--Ezra 8:21-32

E.J. Waggoner

Chapter 6

Nehemiah's Prayer

Nehemiah was cup-bearer to Artaxerxes Longimanus, king of Persia who reigned 461-425 BC. It was in the twentieth year (444 BC) of Artaxerxes Longimanus, that Hanani and "certain men of Judah," (Nehemiah 1:2) came to Susa, the winter palace of the kings of Persia, and Nehemiah inquired of them "concerning the Jews that had escaped which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem." (Nehemiah 1:2)

And they said, "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." (Nehemiah 1:3)

It was now fully ninety years since the laying of the foundation of the temple, as recorded in last week's lesson;--See Article 2 in this section, "The Second Temple," Signs of the Times, February 11, 1886. and although the temple had been finished some time, yet the walls still remained in ruins as they had been left by Nebuchadnezzar.

As was learned in the lesson of last week, about 50,000 people returned to Jerusalem under the decree of Cyrus in 536 BC. They had no sooner got the temple under way than serious opposition arose. The people who had been sent into Samaria by Sargon (2

Kings 17:24-33) and Esar-haddon, (Ezra 4:2,9,10) kings of Assyria, and who had thus inhabited the land of Israel since the captivity of the ten tribes, came and proposed to help the Jews in building the temple. But as these were really heathen, though pretending in a manner to fear Jehovah, "Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the chief of the fathers of Israel, said unto them. You 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." (Ezra 4:3)

It would be an immense benefit to both the church and the world, if this spirit were found in the work of the church at the present day, instead of so many fairs, festivals, grab-bags, fish-ponds, ring-cakes, raffles, and gambling enterprises generally, by which the world is inveighed into the support of the church. True, the opposition of the world would be greater, but so would the devotion of the church.

When these people found they could have no part in the building, they employed every possible means to hinder it. They hired accusers against them at the court of Cyrus, but to no purpose; and as soon as Cyrus was dead, and Cambyses reigned,--Cambyses, 529-522 BC, is the Ahasuerus of Ezra 4:6. they wrote to him "an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem." (Ezra 4:6)

But their accusation was of no avail with Cambyses, and so the work went on in spite of their opposition. But Cambyses was no sooner dead, than they renewed their efforts and wrote a letter to his

successor, Smerdis; (The Artaxerxes of Ezra 4:7-23) and he, being an enemy to the religion of Cyrus and Cambyses, was glad of an opportunity to oppose a work which they had favored, and so he issued a decree that the work should stop. And the Samaritans hurried up to Jerusalem, and made the Jews "cease by force and power." (Ezra 4:23)

The reign of Smerdis only continued from the spring of 522 BC to the end of the year, January 1, 521 BC. Darius Hystaspes (Ezra 4:24) came to the throne of Persia, and in the beginning of his second year Haggai and Zechariah the prophets stirred up the people to carry forward the work, and the building began again.

The work had no sooner began again than the Samaritans renewed their opposition, and wrote a letter to Darius; but as they were different men from those who had written the other letters, they gave a very fair account of the matter, as they had received it from the Jews. They told him that the Jews claimed to be working under authority of a decree of Cyrus, and asked him to look among the records and see whether there was any such decree. (Ezra 5) Darius did so, and found the original decree; whereupon he made a decree commanding the Samaritans to not only let the Jews alone, but to give them expenses from the king's tribute to help in building, and animals for burnt offerings and wheat, salt, wine, and oil. (Ezra 6:8-10) And so, "The house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king." (Ezra 6:15)

After this, for sixty years we have nothing further in regard to affairs in Jerusalem.

In the seventh year of Artaxerxes Longimanus, 457 BC, he issued a decree under which Ezra led up from Babylon about 7,000 people. But though Ezra and his company went up there to help build the city and the wall, (Ezra 9:9) yet the people had so intermarried with the nations around them, in taking strange wives from among them, that all Ezra's time was occupied in reforming these things, and re-establishing and regulating the worship of God and the service of the house of God, and in bringing back the people to obedience to the word of God.

And on this account the building of the wall was neglected for thirteen years longer, till the time of Nehemiah, as given in the lesson of today. Nehemiah received letters from Artaxerxes Longimanus to the governors beyond the Euphrates, and so departed and came to Jerusalem. But, "When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel." (Nehemiah 2:10)

When Nehemiah had been there three days, he arose in the night and viewed the ruins of the wall round about the city; then he called upon all the people, and said, "Come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work." (Nehemiah 2:17-18)

The work was apportioned among the people and the priests, and every one built over against his own house. "So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in the fifty and two days." (Nehemiah 6:15)

If each one would, over against his own house, build up the wall of Christian character, the troubles in the church would all cease, and the work of God would prosper.

Nehemiah remained there twelve years as governor, at his own charges; and at his table were supported "a hundred and fifty of the Jews and rulers, beside those that came to [him] from among the heathen ... yet for all this required not I the bread of the governor, because the bondage was heavy upon this people. ... But the former governors that had been before me were chargeable unto the people, and had taken of them bread and wine, beside forty shekels of silver; yea, even their servants bore rule over the people: but so did not I, because of the fear of God." (Nehemiah 5:17-18,15)

Nehemiah is one of the most entirely unselfish men mentioned in the Bible. He sought the good of the people always, in every thing acting always in the fear of God.--Signs of the Times, February 18, 1886--Notes on the International Lesson, February 28--Nehemiah 1:1-11

A.T. Jones

Chapter 7

Reading the Law

When Nehemiah had finished the walls of Jerusalem, and had set up the gates, the enemies of the Jews were still active, as they had been from the beginning--even as Daniel had prophesied nearly a hundred years before that the walls should be built, "even in troublous times," (Daniel 9:25) and watchmen were set upon the wall, all around, "every one in his watch, and every one to be over against his house." (Nehemiah 7:3)

Although the wall was finished and the gates set up, "The city was large and great: but the people were few therein, and the houses were not built." (Nehemiah 7:4)

But before going any further in the matter of building particularly, he began a further reformation in the lives and worship of the people. So he says: "And my God put it into my heart to gather together the nobles, and the rulers, and the people, that they might be reckoned by genealogy." (Nehemiah 7:5) "And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spoke unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded to Israel. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. And 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." (Nehemiah 8:1-3)

The words of the book, though written by Moses, were really the words of God; and it was right that the ears of all the people should be attentive to the words that were read to them. Inattention to the reading of the word of God is disrespectful to its Author. If some one of the rulers of this world were to send a communication to us personally, there would be close attention given to the reading of it. The Bible is the communication which the Majesty of the universe sends to us; it is the word of our best Friend; in it He teaches us to profit, telling us the way which we should go to reach happiness and peace at all times. Would that all people today to whom the word is read, were as attentive as were these people at Jerusalem when Ezra read. "Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel; I am the Lord your God which teaches you to profit, which leads you by the way that you should go. O that you had hearkened to my commandments! then had your peace been as a river, and your righteousness as the waves of the sea." (Isaiah 48:17-18) "And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose. And 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 worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground." (Nehemiah 8:4-6)

It is right for all the people to have part in the worship. It is right for the people to listen attentively to the reading of the word; it is right for them to join in thought in the prayer of the one who leads; and it is right for them to respond to the words of the prayer by saying, "Amen." This is the rule of the New Testament as well as of the Old.

Paul prohibits speaking in the church in an unknown tongue without an interpreter, because the unlearned could not say "Amen" to what was said, seeing he could not understand what was said. Therefore if he who speaks or prays is to do it in language that can be understood, so that those who hear can say "Amen" to it, why do not those who hear say "Amen" to it? If it be the speaker's part to speak in language to be understood so that the hearers may say "Amen," it is equally the part of the hearers to say "Amen" when they do understand. But there is so much coldness, formality, listlessness, and inattention, in the services of the church that this duty is almost entirely neglected. This ought not so to be.

Such was the preaching on the occasion of which we write; for says the scripture: "So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading." (Nehemiah 8:8)

This is the only kind of preaching that is strictly genuine. The Bible is God's word to the people. The minister is to take that word, and, by the aid of the Spirit of God, to put it into the mind and hearts of the people, and it can be done only by reading in the book in the

law of God distinctly, and giving the sense, and causing them to understand the reading. It cannot be done by taking a single verse, or sentence, or perhaps a single word, from the Bible, and then talking about something else for thirty or forty minutes. In other words, it cannot be done as D. L. Moody says that some men do: Take the text from the Bible, and go all over Christendom for the sermon. Under the solemn charge: "before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick [living] and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom," (2 Timothy 4:1) the command of God is, "Preach the word." (2 Timothy 4:2)

Again: "The prophet that has a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that has my word, let him speak my word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? says the Lord. Is not my word like as a fire? says the Lord; and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" (Jeremiah 23:28-29)

The word of man is chaff; the word of God is wheat. Give the people the word of God--the wheat--and they will have bread; they will have that upon which they can feed. Give them the words of men, and they have chaff indeed.

Christ said, "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life;" (John 6:63) and, "By every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God," (Matthew 4:4) shall man live. And when He sends forth men to preach, the commission is: "Go therefore, and teach all nations, Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I

have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." (Matthew 28:19-20)

It is true, that if the word of God be preached faithfully there will be many points wherein the people will be found to be doing wrong; many things will be found held contrary to the word of God; and things even which our fathers did not do, shall we have to do, as it happened at the time of which this lesson tells.

- It will be found that the coming of the Lord is near, and that we must prepare to meet Him while living.

- It will be found that future life depends on the resurrection of the dead, and not on the immortality of the soul.

- It will be found that future life is obtained through the Son of God alone; that he that has the Son has life, and he that has not the Son of God has not life.

- It will be found that the seventh day, and not the first day of the week, is the Sabbath of the Lord, and that we must keep it so, or our action will not be Sabbath-keeping at all.

And when we find out these things, and many others in which we have thought and done wrong, we must be like this people of old, honest enough with God and ourselves to turn from our ways and thoughts and conform to those of the word of God. (See Nehemiah 8:13-17) Then it will be with us as was said to them,

"The joy of the Lord is your strength." (Nehemiah 8:10)--Signs of the Times, February 25, 1886--Notes on the International Lesson, March 7--Nehemiah 8:1-12

A.T. Jones

Chapter 8

Public Reading of the Scriptures

And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spoke unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded to Israel. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. And 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. ... And 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 worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, 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. And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, 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. 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 sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength. So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be 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." (Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-12)

Willing Hearers

What a difference between that congregation and the ordinary, congregation in these days! The people came together as one man in the street, or rather, "broad place,"--a public square,--and asked to have the Word of God read to them. Who would not like to teach such a people?

In these days congregations have to be almost drummed together; but it may be that the fault lies no more in the people than in the one who stands before them. It is a fact, however, that there is less interest in matters of religion than in almost anything else. Where could you find a congregation of men and women in any so-called "Christian land," who would stand from early morning, as soon as it was light, until midday, to hear the Word of God read and expounded? That is what the people did in the time of Ezra.

Nowadays an hour's service is regarded as outrageously long, if it be a religious meeting. If it be a gathering for pleasure, time is not

regarded. People can stand a great deal of that which they like. An entertainment of some light nature may last hours, and people will take no note of the lapse of time. It is nothing for a speaker in a political campaign to make an address an hour and a half or two hours long, and people will stand and listen. Yet the very same ones,--professed Christians, too,--would regard a Bible study of an hour as a great imposition.

Attentive Hearers

The literal rendering of the Hebrew, without the addition of the word "attentive," is even more emphatic than the way we have it.

"The ears of the people were unto the book of the law."

They had no ears for anything else. Nothing could turn away their ears from hearing the law. They were not present as a sort of complement to the speaker, as though they were doing him a personal favor in attending; but they had asked to hear the law, and that was what they intended to hear. They heard something worth listening to, and that, together with their interest in that which is good, explains their long standing to hear.

Reverent Hearers

When Ezra opened the book of the law, all the people stood up. It was the living Word of God, that they were about to hear, and they regarded themselves in the presence of God. It was God

himself who was about to speak to them, and it was fitting that they should assume a reverent attitude before Him.

When Ezra addressed the Lord, leading them in worship, they all bowed down with their faces to the ground. It had been a long time since they had the privilege of listening to the Word of God, and they were eager for it. The greater facilities the people have for obtaining and learning the Word of God, the less they regard it. In lands where the Bible is not so plentiful, those who know of it prize it more highly.

Responsive Hearers

All the people said, "Amen, amen," when Ezra read and prayed. It was not a dumb congregation. Worshipers are usually altogether too dignified. It is considered out of place for anyone in the pews to utter a sound. There is no precedent in the Bible for any such thing as one man monopolizing all the time, while the people have no opportunity to speak for themselves. The perfection of Christian worship will never be reached until the people in the pews feel just as much at liberty to speak as the man on the platform.

Let no one fear confusion. There is no pleasure in talking to people who do not care to listen, so that if they are dissatisfied, and wish to object, they might as well do so as to sit quietly and have words fall on closed ears. Indeed it would be to the advantage of the people, and of the speaker as well, if his sole object is to teach, if everybody felt free to express his dissent from what is presented, or

at least his failure to grasp any part of the subject. That would give the teacher the opportunity to make things clearer, for he would know just where the difficulties were in the minds of his hearers.

If public services were conducted on the plan of question and answer, the results would in general be far more satisfactory. The desire to hear, on the part of people who came voluntarily, and the sense of what courtesy demands in any assembly, small or large, would in general prevent any disturbance or unseemly expression of dissent.

But that which we had specially in mind, and that which is suggested by the text, is response by way of assent. The people said, "Amen, amen." The Word found a place in their hearts, and they gave expression to their agreement. There is nothing more encouraging to a speaker than such expressions. It is not that he cares for it personally, but it lets him know that he is not laboring in vain; that the people are really listening, and not dozing, or thinking of something else, and that they are being benefited.

Spontaneous Response

Formality is the curse of religion. The church recognized the fact that the people should respond, and has therefore arranged for it, specifying just what the congregation ought to say, and when to say it. When the heart is touched, and the feelings are stirred, there is no need of instructions as to how and when to give expression to the responsive chord; and if the heart is not in it, it is only mockery.

There is nowadays a great deal of discussion over ritualism, but there is in reality as much ritualism in Nonconformist congregations as in the High Church, although of a different kind, and not prescribed by law. When the Holy Spirit is given control, formality will disappear like a cloud before the sun, and every Word of the Lord will meet with a hearty response by both voice and action.

The Sense Given

The instructors read in the book of the law distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused people to understand. Take notice that the people got the sense, because the Word was read distinctly. It was not simply that the Word was read slowly, but it was read in such a way that just what was in it appeared. The readers did not put a construction upon it, but allowed the sense of the passage to stand forth. "The opening of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple." (Psalm 119:130,RV) "The Lord gives wisdom: out of His mouth comes knowledge and understanding." (Proverbs 2:6)

The Law of Moses

Compare verse 1 with verse 8. There is a too common idea that "the law of Moses" is something entirely distinct from the law of God. There is an unreasoning and unreasonable prejudice against Moses, that does not obtain with reference to any other Bible writer. If something be cited from the first five books of the Bible, the reply will often be, "Oh, that's in the law of Moses," as though that ended

the matter. People who will not discount the words of Isaiah or Jeremiah or Paul or Peter, will treat the words of Moses as of no account. There is no reason for this, unless it be that in the writings of Moses fundamental truths are found.

No other man has been so highly honored by the Lord. No other writer has had such direct commendation by the Lord. The law of Moses is the law of God, just as truly as the writings of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel are the Word of God. Moses did not make any laws, and it is altogether a mistake to call him the lawgiver of Israel. He spoke and wrote as he was moved by the Holy Ghost, just as the other holy men of old did. (2 Peter 1:21) Whoever despises the writings of Moses, despises the Lord Jesus. "For had you believed Moses, you would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if you believe not his writings, how shall you believe my words?" (John 5:46-47)

The Joy of the Lord

The people wept when they heard the words of the law. "By the law is the knowledge of sin." (Romans 3:20)

It is natural enough for people to weep when they hear the law which convicts them of sin; but God makes it known to them in order that they may rejoice. The law is not against the promises of God. "Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law." (Galatians 3:21)

The first office of the Comforter is to convict of sin. "And when He is come, He will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment." (John 16:8)

The Word of life is declared unto us in order that our joy may be full. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard we declare unto you, that you also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write unto you, that your joy may be full. This then is the message which we have heard of Him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all." (1 John 1:1-5)

The joy of the Lord is righteousness, victory. The joy that was set before Christ, enabled Him to endure the cross. "Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2)

It was not merely joy that He hoped to get in the future, but present joy, the joy of victory, that sustained Him. That, and that only, which will enable us to hold out against the temptations of the flesh, is the joy of the life of Christ, given to us freely; it causes all

the pleasures of sin to sink into insignificance. When we receive the Word into our mouth and into our heart, there will necessarily be joy; not a momentary ebullition (a sudden outburst of emotion). of feeling, but a joy that is eternal. "Your words were found, and I did eat them; and your Word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of my heart." (Jeremiah 15:16)

When the word of the Lord came to the children of Israel to forsake Egypt, they obeyed; but at the waters of Marah, and at many other places, it is easy to see that while they were bodily out of Egypt, their hearts were still there. The Lord has called us as Christians to come out from the world and be separate. Nominally we have obeyed this call; but with many, the hearts are still where they were.

Just as surely as the longing of the Israelites for the leeks and onions and flesh-pots of Egypt was the cause of their destruction in the wilderness, so now unless all is surrendered--unless we forsake everything, cut loose from every earthly entanglement, and place ourselves and all that we are, body, soul and spirit, on God's side, we shall miss the promised land.--Present Truth, November 9, 1899--Notes on the International Sunday-School Lessons--Nehemiah 8:1-12

E.J. Waggoner

Chapter 9

Keeping the Sabbath

"In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day; and I testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals. There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the Sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem. Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing is this that you do, and profane the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet you bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the Sabbath. And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the Sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the Sabbath; and some of my servants set I at the gates, that there should no burden be brought in on the Sabbath day. So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice. Then I testified against them, and said unto them, Why do you lodge about the wall? if you do so again, I will lay hands on you. From that time forth came they no more on the Sabbath. And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the Sabbath day." (Nehemiah 13:15-22)

This lesson is called "Keeping the Sabbath," but it should rather be called "Breaking the Sabbath," for that is what it is all about.

In order to understand the acts of Nehemiah, it is necessary to put ourselves in his place. Therefore we must consider the Jewish State, and note the difference between it and nations generally. The great mistake that most people make in reading this account, is in supposing that his action is a model for rulers in these days. Let us see why it is not.

In the first place, Israel was not a nation in the ordinary sense of the term. When Balaam tried to curse Israel, God made him bless them, so that we know that whatever he said was directed by the Spirit of the Lord. Looking at Israel, he said, "Lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations." (Numbers 23:9)

Then what did Israel constitute? Simply, "the household of God," (Ephesians 2:19) the church. It was never God's design that His people should be governed as other people are, but that He should be their sole ruler. If they had lived by faith in God, as Abraham did, there would never have been any need for judges or any sort of officers of the law. All these things came in solely as a result of that lack of faith which rejected God as ruler.

The family is the one institution which God has designed. The head of every family was to be the priest for the family, and each family, including all the dependents, would form a congregation, or

what in modern language is erroneously called a church. That this family plan was to be perpetuated, is seen in the promise to Abraham, "In you shall all families of the earth be blessed." (Genesis 12:3)

In harmony with this plan God was bringing Israel out of Egypt--a great collection of families constituting God's great family, which was to be added to as others accepted the faith. That the family is still the unit of God's government, and that His people all form one family, is seen by the fact that we come into the kingdom of God only by a new birth. "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3)

God's subjects are all His children, and His kingdom consist solely of His family. "The whole family in heaven and earth is named." (Ephesians 3:15) from Christ, who has been placed over it as Head. God is the "Father of all." (Ephesians 4:6)

When the children of Israel called for a king, like other people, God said that it was a rejection of Him. "And the Lord said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto you: for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them." (1 Samuel 8:7)

They wanted a king, that they might be like the nations, or, literally, like the heathen around them. "Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations." (1 Samuel 8:5)

All the nations were heathen, and in fact the formation of nations is in itself heathenism,--the rejection of God as ruler. Although the people rejected the Lord, He did not reject them. He still claimed them as His children. He reserved the right to select their king, and the family idea was still maintained as far as possible.

We must remember that it was religion, and that alone, that made the people of Israel. The name itself signified victory over sin, the victory of faith. There were no different "denominations" in the kingdom, as in England, for instance, for the entire nation was simply the church of God, although they had deviated from God's plan for them.

At the time which our lesson covers, Nehemiah was at the head of this family government. Israel had returned from the Babylonian captivity, wither they had been taken because they kept not the Sabbath. "Moreover all the chief of the priests, and the people, transgressed very much after all the abominations of the heathen; and polluted the house of the Lord which He had hallowed in Jerusalem. And the Lord God of their fathers sent to them by His messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because He had compassion on his people, and on His dwelling place: But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised His words, and misused His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till there was no remedy. Therefore He brought upon them the king of the Chaldees, who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion upon young

man or maiden, old man, or him that stooped for age: He gave them all into his hand. And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king, and of his princes; all these he brought to Babylon. And they burnt the house of God, and broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and burnt all the palaces thereof with fire, and destroyed all the goodly vessels thereof. And them that had escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; where they were servants to him and his sons until the reign of the kingdom of Persia: To fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her sabbaths: for as long as she lay desolate she kept sabbath, to fulfill threescore and ten years." (2 Chronicles 36:14-21)

Now that the seventy years of captivity were at an end, and the people were in their own land again, it was a terrible thing to begin at once to do that which had before brought such calamities upon them. It is not to be wondered at that Nehemiah was greatly aroused over it.

Remembering that the whole people were really one family, for Jacob was the father of all, we read the commandment concerning the Sabbath: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shall you labor, and do all your work; But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God: in it you shall not do any work, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger that is within your gates: For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and

all that in them is, and rested the seventh day; wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it." (Exodus 20:8-11)

There is no question that every man has the right to demand that the Sabbath shall not be profaned in his house, either by servants or visitors. It is his duty to do this. It is his duty to see that tradesmen do not deliver goods on that day. He has no right to enter into the homes of others and say how they shall do on the Sabbath, but he himself must keep the Sabbath, and that means that he must not allow the Sabbath to be profaned on his premises.

Nehemiah was, under God, the leader of this family. He was the leader of the church. As such it was his province to exhort all the members of the family, and to warn strangers that they must not come upon the premises for the purpose of doing business on the Sabbath day. But this no more gives the rulers of ordinary governments the right to legislate concerning Sabbath-keeping, than it gives them the right to say whether or not men shall be Christians. The two cases are not at all parallel.

It must not be lost sight of that it was the Sabbath, and not Sunday, that was in question here. It was the seventh day of the week, the day before the first day of the week, commonly called Sunday. The people in those days had no more thought of the first day of the week as the Sabbath, than they had of the fourth. It was not until long after the crucifixion and ascension of Christ, that Sunday began gradually, without any precept or authority, to take the place of the Sabbath of the Lord.

Remember that God does not change. His ways are equal. "Yet you say, The way of the Lord is not equal. Hear now, O house of Israel; Is not my way equal? are not your ways unequal? ... Yet the house of Israel says, The way of the Lord is not equal. O house of Israel, are not my ways equal? are not your ways unequal?" (Ezekiel 18:25,29)

He once punished Israel severely for violating the Sabbath--the seventh day of the week. This is well known. Now can anybody say that there would be equal dealing if He should now look upon labor on that day as a lawful thing, and should punish men for laboring on a day on which He then allowed and commanded them to labor? If God did so, how could He judge the world?

No; depend upon it, God does not change, and not one jot or tittle of His law has changed. The same day is now the Sabbath that was the Sabbath in the days of Nehemiah, and so it will be to all eternity. Do you think it is not a light thing to disregard God's commandments? If so, read: "Who gave Jacob for a spoil, and Israel to the robbers? did not the Lord, He against whom we have sinned? for they would not walk in His ways, neither were they obedient unto His law. Therefore He has poured upon him the fury of His anger, and the strength of battle: and it has set him on fire round about, yet he knew not; and it burned him, yet he laid it not to heart." (Isaiah 42:24-25)--Present Truth, November 23, 1899--Notes on the International Sunday-School Lessons--Nehemiah 13:15-22

E.J. Waggoner

Chapter 10

Esther's Petition

In the connected story of the Bible, the place of the book of Esther is between the 6th and 7th chapters of Ezra, between Darius and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia; for the Ahasuerus of the book of Esther was Xerxes, king of Persia.

The Hebrew Ahashverosh is the natural equivalent of the old persian Khshayarsha, the true name of the monarch called by the Greeks Xerxes, as now read in his inscriptions.--Encyclopedia Britannica, article: Ahasuerus

His reign was from 486-465 BC. His father, Darius Hystaspes, had left him the empire extended to its widest limit; and his reign marks the period of the greatest glory of the Persian Empire, and the beginning of its decline. In Daniel 11:2 is a prophecy spoken in the third year of Cyrus, 534 BC, saying: "Behold, there shall stand up yet three kings in Persia; and the fourth shall be far richer than they all; and by his strength through his riches he shall stir up all against the realm of Grecia." (Daniel 11:2)

It was in fulfillment of this prophecy that Xerxes invaded Greece, 480 BC, with the largest army ever known, when, in resisting it, the three hundred Spartans under Leonidas immortalized themselves at Thermopylae. It was in preparation for this invasion of Greece, that he gathered all the princes and governors of his

empire to Susa, as recorded in Esther 1:3-9. "In the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him." (Esther 1:3)

He called the governors and princes of the provinces to his capital to deliberate upon the invasion of Greece, and to levy the tribute and the forces that should be furnished by each province for the purpose. The royal entertainment continued six months. But it was no later than the seventh day of the feast when the king in his drunkenness commanded his chamberlains. "To bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to show the people and the princes her beauty. But the queen Vashti refused to come." (Esther 1:11-12)

Then the king in council decided to put her away, and to publish a decree in the language of every people, "that every man should bear rule in his own house."(Esther 1:22)

Then in his sixth year he led his army into Greece, suffered a terrible defeat at Salamis, and at Plataea, and, like Sennacherib of old, returned with shame of face into his own land. And there he, for the rest of his days, sought to occupy himself in the exercise of arms of a very different nature from those with which he had been occupied in the invasion of Greece. Then, "he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her." (Esther 2:1)

It would seem that he remembered Vashti with the wish to call her to his side again; but the "decree" of the Persians and Medes had been published against her, and it was impossible to alter or reverse that; so he was compelled to do without Vashti, and seek another in her place, and the choice fell upon Esther, the adopted daughter of her cousin Mordecai. "And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti." (Esther 2:17)

Shortly after this, two of the king's chamberlains had laid a plot to assassinate him, and Mordecai learned of it. He told Esther who brought it to the king; the matter was discovered; the two men were hanged, and there was a record made of the whole matter in the chronicles of the kingdom. Next Xerxes promoted Haman the Agagite to the chief place, "above all the princes that were with him." (Esther 3:1)

When the king promoted him, Haman exalted himself; and when all bowed and revered him as he passed except Mordecai, it soon created a stir; for Mordecai "had told them that he was a Jew." (Esther 3:4)

Being a Jew who feared and worshiped God, he could neither bow nor reverence any one but God. "Then Haman was full of wrath. And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had showed him the people of Mordecai: wherefore Haman

sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom." (Esther 3:5-6)

Haman therefore succeeded in obtaining a decree for the destruction of "a certain people," (Esther 3:8) whose laws were "diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws." (Esther 3:8)

So the decree was published throughout the realm. "And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed." (Esther 3:15) "When Mordecai perceived all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry; And came even before the king's gate. ... So Esther's maids and her chamberlains came and told it her...and she sent raiment to clothe Mordecai, and to take away his sackcloth from him; and he received it not." (Esther 4:1-2,4)

Then she sent her chamberlain, "to know what it was, and why it was;" (Esther 4:5) and Mordecai told him all about it, and sent word to her to go to the king and "make request before him for her people." (Esther 4:8)

But it was death for any one to go to the king without being called, unless the king should hold out the royal scepter; and as Esther had not been called for thirty days, it was a great risk indeed for her to go into the presence of the capricious king without being called.

But Mordecai told her that if the Jews were indeed destroyed, she would not escape any more than any of the rest of the Jews. He also told her a truth in which is embodied the principle that underlies all of God's calling and work. "If you altogether hold your peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but you and your father's house shall be destroyed: and who knows whether you are come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14)

God's purposes in the affairs of men will surely be accomplished. They will be accomplished by the instrumentality of men. And when He calls anybody to His work, whether directly or by putting him in a position of responsibility or influence by which men have a right to expect of him help in crises; if that person fails, then enlargement and deliverance will arise from another place, and he will be left in the place which he was weakly chosen, and the cause of God will advance without him.

We owe to God and to His cause all our influence of position, all our responsibility of place, wherever it may be; and when a crisis comes, we are, like the fair queen Esther, to show our faithfulness, trusting in God for the result. It was for just such a time as this that she was brought to that place, and now if she should fail in her responsibility, she would show herself entirely unworthy of the place.

And so it is ever. God's gifts are not for nothing. He expects them to be used for His glory, and "them that honor me I will honor, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed," (1 Samuel 2:30) is His word to all. Esther nobly fulfilled her calling; she found favor in the eyes of God and the king; and by her, deliverance arose for her nation and people.

Haman, expecting to be honored above all by the king, pronounces the sentence of what he himself shall do in honor of Mordecai, whom he abhors; having erected a gallows upon which Mordecai shall be hanged, he himself is hanged upon it; having devoted to destruction Mordecai and his people, the evil which he intended came upon himself and upon his house.--Signs of the Times, March 4, 1886--Notes on the International Lesson, March 14--Esther 4:10-17; 5:1-8

A.T. Jones