

EZRA

A.S. Copley

"Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the Word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and He hath charged me to build Him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah" - Ezra 1:1, 2; II Chronicles 36:22, 23.

The name "Ezra" means "help." Ezra was more than a help to his people Israel. We have this interesting bit of history from his pen. It covers a period of about eighty years, 536 to 456 B.C. Twelve years later, Nehemiah appeared on the scene and labored with Ezra.

The book falls naturally into two great divisions, marked by two deportations to Jerusalem. The first six chapters embrace the first deportation in 536 B.C.; and the last four chapters, the second deportation, led by Ezra in 458 B.C.

THE FIRST DEPORTATION

Chapter One

Jeremiah had prophesied a captivity of the Jews of seventy years duration which came to pass. The first five chapters of Daniel are occupied with that period; namely, the duration of the Babylonian Empire. Cyrus, the first king of the Medo-Persian Empire, overthrew the former and became the second world-ruler of the Divinely decreed Gentle times which cover 2520 years beginning with 606 B.C. By taking Babylon, Cyrus freed the Jews from captivity. He was a remarkable character. Isaiah wrote of him, giving his name before he was born and a hundred years before he liberated the Jews. Read Isaiah 45:1-13 and you will appreciate his place and words the more. When Jehovah wants something accomplished, He has the instrument prepared for the occasion. How safe and happy are we who trust Him fully and always. He announces His plans beforehand and then fulfills them. Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed the house of God in God's will; then, seventy years later, Cyrus gave orders to rebuild it in God's will.

"He's real to me, He's real to me,
My blessed Lord is real to me,
A living bright reality,
My blessed Lord is real to me. "

THE RETURNING REMNANT

Chapter Two

The names and numbers of those who went up to Jerusalem at the first are given in chapter two. Among the prominent names were Zerubbabel and Jeshua (Joshua) who became, respectively, governor and high priest. Sheshbazzar, in 1:8, was another name for Zerubbabel. Also, Nehemiah and Mordecai went up. Ezra went and returned - Nehemiah 12:1. "The Nethinims" should not be overlooked. There were 392 in the first going up, and 220 in the second - Ezra 2:58 and 8:20. That was rather a religious title than a national. "Nethinims" means "dedicated or devoted ones." They stood in sharp contrast with the "princes and rulers" who led in the trespass of intermarrying with the nations - Ezra 9. Nehemiah 10:28-30 is a clear commentary on the Nethinims. They were unlike the Gibeonites who served Israel by compulsion because they were caught in their trickery. With others, the Nethinims voluntarily "separated themselves from the people of the lands unto the law of God ... they clave to their brethren" - Nehemiah 10: 28, 29. They speak to us of an entire surrender to the Lord. We call such saints "full overcomers" today. The total number of the first deportation was nearly fifty thousand - Ezra 2:64, 65; Nehemiah 7:66, 67.

AN ALTAR ERECTED

Chapter Three

An altar is erected - Ezra 3:1-3. We infer from 7:9, that the people were at least four months in journeying from Babylon to Jerusalem. Therefore, in the seventh month, they builded an altar upon which to offer sacrifices - 3:1. That was a wise beginning. It speaks to us of beginning our lives at Calvary, and of doing everything as based upon Christ's atoning death for us. "Fear was upon them (Israel) because of the people of those countries" - 3:3. The Cross, typically, was their protection. If we find refuge from God's wrath against sin, by faith in Jesus' death for us, we are

also safe from the power of Satan and wicked men.

We have supposed that the temple must be rebuilt at the close of this age before the Jews could offer sacrifices. But here we learn that, on returning to Jerusalem after the seventy years captivity, they offered burnt offerings and kept the third feast - the feast of tabernacles - before anything was done toward restoring the temple. Why may it not be after a similar fashion in these days? We are expecting to learn any day that Israel is offering sacrifices somewhere in Jerusalem. Will we hasten off to glory beforehand? God knows. We are believing, hoping, and longing for the trumpet to blow.

The foundation of the temple was laid in the next year - Ezra 3:8-13. It was not a cold formal affair. The trumpeters and singers performed happily "after the ordinance of David." "And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord; because He is good, for His mercy endureth for ever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid" - Ezra 3:11. Should not we praise our God more vehemently and shout much louder, because He has laid a great foundation for an eternal salvation and a sublime spiritual structure by the death and resurrection of His Son? - I Corinthians 3:11; Ephesians 2:20-22. What brokenness of spirit, what tears of joy, what volumes of mellow praises, redemption deserves from us in Christ Jesus.

ADVERSARIES TO PROGRESS

Chapter Four

Building of the temple was hindered by the people of the land - Ezra 4.

First: The adversaries of Israel said, "Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye do" - Ezra 4:2. Satan sought at once to delude God's people, What a warning to us, not to allow the world to join with us in building the Church, much less to appeal to the world for help. We should say as did the Jews, "We ourselves together will build unto the Lord God of Israel" - Ezra 4:3. We need none but God and ourselves. Thousands of saints are snared by a fifty-fifty business with the world, which ties their hands and shuts out Divine power.

Second: When the enemy could not get in by craft, then they troubled the Jews and hindered their work. They hired folks to frustrate their plans for seven years of Cyrus' reign. During the seven years reign of Ahasuerus and the eight months reign of Artaxerxes (Pseudo-Smerdis), their foes wrote to the kings to have the building stopped. "So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia" - Ezra 4:24. That was 520 B.C. There was possibly some cause of that hindrance among the Jews themselves, as is intimated by the later prophecy of Haggai. Some of them were showing more interest in their own homes than in God's house. We should always give His cause the preference.

Let sorrow do its work,

Come grief or pain,

Sweet are thy messengers,

Sweet their refrain;

When they can sing with me,

More love, O Christ, to Thee.

HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH PROPHESED

Chapter Five

The building of the temple was resumed through these prophets. The Lord always stirs up someone to lead out in bringing about a revival. The prophets brought the message of God which wrought conviction. Then the officers began to build the temple. No sooner had they begun than the enemy arose to oppose them, saying, "Who hath commanded you to build this house, and to make up this wall?" - Ezra 5:3. Governor Tatnai wrote to King Darius, complaining against the Jews for building; but they refused to be hindered any more. Therefore, God came forth in their behalf.

THE TEMPLE FINISHED AND DEDICATED

Chapter Six

Darius made a decree (520 B.C.) that the Jews should not be interfered with in their work of building. This Darius (Hystaspes) reigned from 521 to 485 B.C. Having made search in the records of the kings, he found the decree which Cyrus had made sixteen years previous that God had ordered him to build for Him a house. From that time forward, the building went up without any more delay. Hence, we read, "And this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar

(the twelfth month), which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king" - Ezra 6:15. That was 516 B.C. The Children of Israel kept the dedication of that temple with joy. They brought offerings of many bullocks, rams, and lambs; and they kept the passover on the fourteenth day of the first month of the next year. They observed also "the feast of unleavened bread"; "for the Lord had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel. When we yield to His Word, God fights for us against our foes, makes the wrath of men to praise Him, and fills our hearts with gladness and adoration to Him. We prove His faithfulness and great goodness again and again. "There is no want to them that fear Him" - Psalm 34:9.

SMILING THROUGH ADVERSITY

Ella Wheeler Wilcox

It is easy enough to be pleasant
When life flows by like a song.
But the one worthwhile is the one who can smile
When everything goes dead wrong.
For the test of the heart is trouble,
And it always comes with the years.
And the smile that is worth the praises of earth
Is the smile that shines through tears.

THE SECOND DEPORTATION

Chapters Seven and Eight

This deportation to Jerusalem was led by Ezra. It was in the seventh year (457 B.C.) of the reign of Artaxerxes (Longimanus, or long-handed), who reigned over Persia from 465 to 425 B.C. Artaxerxes, in this place, is a significant type of Jesus Christ as King. Let us observe at least five striking points of comparison.

First: His name "Artaxerxes" means "venerable" or "honored king." "Arta" or "Arya" is the old name for "Persian," and means "great, honored, venerable." "Kshershe," the root word, means "king." "Ahasuerus" is from the same root and has the same meaning - Esther 1:1. They were used interchangeably as official titles. Now who else is Jesus Christ destined to be but the great, venerable, and honored King? Indeed, Isaiah 9:6 declares that "His Name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." Our captured hearts adore Him gladly as such. We cannot speak too highly of Him. We fail to find terms of adequate praise and adoration by which to extol our coming Bridegroom. The most high-sounding titles we ascribe to Him and our most vociferous notes of honor are feeble, as compared with His deservings; but He accepts them and is pleased. We hope to glorify Him more in OUR glorified bodies. Hallelujah for the hope!

Second: Artaxerxes announced himself to be "king of kings" - Ezra 7:12. Such he was, being one of the rulers of the second world empire by Divine rite. Cyrus had said, "The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth" - Ezra 1:2. It is even as God had declared concerning the first Gentile world empire, saying, "And now have I given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, My servant; and the beasts of the field have I given him also to serve him. And all nations shall serve him, and his son, and his son's son, until the very time of his land come: and then many nations and great kings shall serve themselves of him" - Jeremiah 27:6, 7. These were each "king of kings" during their dominions.

Much more will our glorious Bridegroom be "King of kings, and Lord of lords" for a millennium of years - I Timothy 6:15; Revelation 17:14; 19:16.

Every knee shall bow before Him and every tongue acknowledge Him in those days - Isaiah 45:23; Philippians 2:11. Even the unregenerate will yield feigned obedience unto the Lord; for Satan and his angels will be bound in the pit - Psalm 18:44; 66:3; 81:15 Revised Version margin. Men will be utterly powerless before the rightful Despot of the fifth universal empire.

Third: Artaxerxes' authority. This is emphatically expressed by seven positive utterances by him. Twice he said, "I make a decree" - once concerning the people going with Ezra; and, once to all the treasurers, that Ezra should have whatever he required - Ezra 7:13, 21. He assured Ezra that he was "sent of the king, and of his seven counsellors, to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem" - 7:14. He gave orders to "deliver ... before the God of Jerusalem," the vessels given

to him for his use there - 7:19. He said with vehemence, "Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done for the house of the God of heaven" - 7:23. He safeguarded all the Jewish officers from all taxation, saying, "We certify you ... it shall not be lawful to impose toll, tribute, or custom, upon them" - 7:24. He gave Ezra full authority to "set magistrates and judges" over Israel in Judah and Jerusalem - 7:25. Finally, "whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him" - 7:26. He had unbounded authority, and he made it manifest. He was a dictator indeed.

Much more shall Jesus Christ reign supreme. He exclaimed soon after His resurrection: "All authority hath been given unto Me in heaven and on earth. Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo; I am with you always (all the days), even unto the end of the world (the consummation of the age)"; that is, the Millennial Age - Matthew 28:18-20 Revised Version. Inasmuch as our Lord is now only in the place of Mediator, at the right hand of His Father's throne, He is not yet exercising that Kingly authority - Hebrews 1:3; Revelation 3:21.

During this Church period of nearly two thousand years, Jesus has been the Lord and Head of His Body the Church. His ministers have not been making disciples of the nations for the Millennial Kingdom on earth, which Matthew 28:19, 20 demanded. They have been the agents of gathering out to a people for His name," whom He beforehand called "My Church" - Acts 15:14; Matthew 16:18. When we perceive that Matthew 28:18-20 pertains to Christ's Millennial reign and not at all to this dispensation, it is plain why the disciples apparently disobeyed Jesus' words and baptized in His Name only and not in the Name of the Trinity. All the doings of the Church are in the Name of Jesus Christ, including water baptism, because He is her Head; and He will be the Bridegroom of the Bride company in the coming ages. He is not King now, except in surrendered hearts. Hence, He cannot exercise regal authority outwardly.

He is not yet crowned universal King on His own throne. We hope to be transported to heaven before His coronation, according to Revelation four. We shall reign with Him. We shall be joined with Christ in judging the world. When the above citation in Matthew will be fulfilled by Jewish missionaries on earth, the Church will be enjoying her Lord in glory. The Bride will enjoy her honeymoon of a thousand years, while Israel will be evangelizing the nations. Study Isaiah 60 with Acts 15:14-17.

These facts explain why some of us do not seem to have the visible success, that many others seem to have, in getting sinners saved. We are moved by the whole counsel of God to feed and build up those who are saved, in view of them being fitted for their destined heavenly place - Acts 20:32. He means to put us on exhibition in the ages to come - Ephesians 2:4-8. Most folk want to be on display now; hence, refuse to let the Spirit by the Word work "effectually" in them and "fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness, and the work of faith with power" - I Thess. 2:13; II Thess. 1:11. If you insist on being in the limelight here, our gracious Lord will let you go in your way; but you will miss the acme glory light, and blush in a far lesser place in the future ages. Do you want a position far removed from the throne of glory? Then continue to make for yourself a place and name down here. Continue to be chummy with everybody, the meanwhile looking out for number one - your own self. Let us exercise the authority of faith over ourselves now; then we will be privileged to exercise regal authority with Christ hereafter.

Fourth: Artaxerxes honored the God of Israel. He mentioned the Name of God sixteen times in his interesting charge to Ezra. He spoke of "the God of heaven," "the God of Israel," the "law of thy God," "the house of thy God," "the will of your God," and "the wisdom of thy God," in a captivating manner - 7:15-26.

Much more, one of the most impressive facts in Jesus' life was the honor He bestowed upon His heavenly Father. He sought His Father's will continually in frequent times of devotion. He said - "I seek not Mine Own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent Me" - John 5:30.

"The Father that sent Me beareth witness of Me" - John 8:18.

"The Father hath not left Me alone" - John 8:29.

"I honour My Father" - John 8:49.

"It is My Father that honoureth Me" - John 8:54.

"But that the world may know that I love the Father; and as the Father gave Me commandment, even so I do" - John 14:31.

"For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth Him all things that Himself doeth: and He will shew Him greater works than these, that ye may marvel" - John 5:20.

The Son mentions the Father more than a hundred times in John's Gospel record alone.

Fifth: The fullness of the king's grant to Ezra is another point of likeness between himself and King Jesus. Note the following overflowing statements:

"Silver and gold ... freely offered unto the God of Israel" - Ezra 7:15.

"All the silver and gold that thou canst find" - 7:16.

"Whatsoever Ezra ... shall require" - 7:21.

"Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven" - 7:23.

"Whatsoever." How typical of the words of Christ! Only His words are far more abundant, and reach way beyond in their unbounded wealth of meaning and grant of privileges and blessings. Jesus said to the disciples -

"Freely ye have received, freely give" - Matthew 10:8.

"Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over" - Luke 6:38.

"Ye shall ask what ye will" - John 15:7.

"Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in My Name, He will give it you" - John 16:23.

"What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" - Mark 11:24.

"If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth" - Mark 9:23.

"Whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee" - Luke 10:35.

"He that eateth of this Bread shall live for ever" - John 6:58.

"He that believeth on Me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water" - John 7:38.

"He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" - John 8:12.

"And I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you for ever" - John 14:16.

"But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in My Name, He shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you" - John 14:26.

How unspeakably rich and happy we are in Christ Jesus. Amen and Amen! With this, Artaxerxes' typical resemblance to Christ ends.

ISRAEL'S TRANSGRESSION

Chapter Nine

They had not separated themselves from the nations - Ezra 9:14. "Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass."

It is a great calamity for saints to intermarry with sinners or have any fellowship in any manner with them. They tie their hands thus, and limit their activities for God. Their usefulness and happiness are sure to be curtailed. Hence, the injunction, "Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord." Study closely and calmly Paul's advice in this matter - II Corinthians 6:14-18. God cannot be a Father in actual experience to those who flirt with the world and have fellowship therewith.

Ezra's prayer - Ezra 9:5-11. Ezra, as identified with the Jews in their crime, cried out to God. He said, "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to Thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens" - 9:6. He confessed their sins to God and acknowledged His justice in chastising them. Their sin was the greater, considering God's goodness in leaving a remnant of the people to escape. He showed wondrous grace by delivering them and giving them favor with the kings, so that they could rebuild the temple. Ezra's cry was effectual. Spiritual saints are always grieved and pained at the carnality and worldliness of other believers. Much of their most effectual ministry is intercession for those who pray little, but talk incessantly, and flirt with the world. Shallow saints will probably

never know the pools of hot tears and the hours of sighs and groans which their conduct has occasioned.

"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 ye may be strong, and eat the good of the land, and leave it for an inheritance to your children for ever" - Ezra 9:12. A carnal pity, steeped in self-interest, often seeks the welfare of the wicked. Jesus said, "Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou" in God's way - Luke 9:60. Rubbing up against the world weakens believers without fail. It induces a sickly appetite for the Word and rob the next generation of its spiritual right. What legacy have we to leave to our children if a life of prayer and faith, a career of devotion to God, and spirituality, do not follow us? How can any believer be so criminal as to live for himself and court a Christ-rejecting world? He makes himself Christ's enemy and the devil's prey.

ISRAEL'S CONFESSION

Chapter Ten

Ezra's prayer proved effectual. A very great congregation of adults and children came to him. "The people wept very sore." They entered into a covenant to put away their strange wives and husbands. Four men were appointed to look after the matter. They were one hundred and six days accomplishing the task; for the number of transgressors exceeded one hundred. How very gracious is our God. "If any man (any saint) sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous" - I John 2:1. Praise God for His unbounded mercy, and praise Jesus for His untiring intercession. Praise Him more abundantly for His keeping love and power of those who yield to be kept. "For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose Name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones" - Isaiah 57:15. "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at My Word" - Isaiah 66:2.

The End

WHEN JESUS COMES

I'm looking now beyond these days of fear,
And see the world devoid of strife, with Jesus here -
No war, no want, all hatred gone,
World peace and joy for everyone.
With Jesus sitting on His golden throne,
While all the nations His Lordship own.
From end of earth, from sea to sea,
They'll praise His Name eternally.

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