

Ephesus : :

*HER START, ZENITH,
FALL AND RUIN.*

— Notes of an Address —

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(ACTS XIX. 1-7 ; XX. 17-32, 36, 37 ; REV.
II. 1-5 ; 2 TIM. I. 15-18.)

THERE are four phases in the history of Ephesus as set forth in these four scriptures : her start, her zenith, her fall, and her ruin. The start of Ephesus was a good start. Very much depends upon the start of a local meeting ; it may be good ; it may be bad ; it may be indifferent ; but the meeting most surely bears the marks of its start ever afterwards. So that when it is a question of starting a fresh local company, the saints should be exercised that the start should be a good one. In one town recently they started a fresh meeting, and when the saints came together to eat the supper on the first day of the week, on the first occasion of their meeting together in that locality, they had a most blessed

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time. It was a good augur of what would follow.

But there is something else about Ephesus, and that is that there was local exercise. When Paul came to Ephesus he found twelve men, and he found those twelve men passing through deep exercise of soul. The way in which they answered his questions, and the eagerness with which they received the truth, and the readiness with which they subjected themselves to baptism, and the way in which the Holy Ghost came upon them, shewed very clearly that they had been divinely exercised. So with the question of starting a fresh meeting in any locality, the question must surely be raised, Is there local exercise there ?

In Ephesus, too, there was moral material to work upon. Those twelve men may have been very ignorant men, but still they were true men, and consequently Paul had something to build with ; and he did build, so that those twelve men formed the nucleus of the most wonderful local

assembly that has ever been. Then again Paul put them under the wing of the Lord Jesus, they were baptised unto the name of the Lord Jesus. In starting a new meeting it may not be a matter of baptising them, but it is well for the saints to get back to their baptism, and to feel that they have been put under the wing of the Lord Jesus, and that He will care for them.

Ephesus had a good start. Paul's doctrine really reached its climax at Ephesus. Paul declared all the counsel of God unto those Ephesians, and when he had done that he could add nothing further. The Latin proverb, "*ne plus ultra*" ("nothing beyond"), might have been written upon his ministry, for he could tell them nothing more. His public ministry was closed, and immediately afterwards we find him a prisoner in chains, in which, perhaps, he remained unto the end of his days.

At the beginning of the Acts we have the cloud receiving Jesus and hiding Him from the eyes of those men

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of Galilee who gazed up steadfastly into heaven, and from that time on to the stoning of Stephen has been called the cloud period ; but when Stephen was stoned the cloud was dispelled. Stephen was the first man to look into heaven—thank God he was not the last. In Stephen we have Peter's ministry and Paul's ministry touching each other. Peter's ministry lay on this side of the cloud ; he knew Christ only on earth. Paul's ministry lay on the other side of the cloud ; he knew Christ only in heaven. In Stephen we have the two combined. He gave to the Sanhedrin a kind of sketch of Jehovah's dealings with His earthly people. 'That was Peter's line. Then he got on to Paul's line.

Stephen went on till he reached Solomon's day. "Solomon built him a house." Then he turned from the brightest spot on earth to the brightest spot in heaven. He looked up steadfastly into heaven and saw Jesus and the glory of God, and when he saw that, Jerusalem, hoary with antiquity, with its temple and its sacrifices, its priest-

hood and its ritual, all crumbled to the ground and to dust. Everything earthly was eclipsed. Stephen at the close of his ministry touched heaven, but Paul at the commencement of his ministry began there. "A light from heaven." These words characterise Paul's ministry. He speaks of himself as having been born before the time. That is, the saints were not mature enough to receive Paul's doctrine. But when Ephesus was formed, Paul's doctrine began to come to the front. What a ministry it was! It had four stages in it.

The first was repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. That is the kind of gospel that we should preach now at the street corners and by the wayside; it is very necessary that it should be preached. Repentance is the plough-share of faith; it goes through the soil of the soul and it turns it up and makes the ground good ground, so that the gospel seed can be received. Repentance is an inward and moral revolution; a thorough change of

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mind about oneself and about God. Then faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, that is, a Person is presented. The first thing in the gospel is the presentation of a Person.

It has been my lot to preach the gospel during some years, but if I had my time over again, in dealing with anxious souls, I should say less about the work of Christ and more about the Person of Christ. I have often seen people perplexed by the plan of salvation; whereas when I have presented to them a Person, a blessed Person, who woos their confidence and wants them to trust in Him, then everything has been simplified. I remember many years ago, when quite a lad, I knelt down by my bedside and looked up and said, "Lord Jesus, I do trust Thee." I knew nothing about the work, I could not explain the philosophy of the gospel, but I felt that yonder was One who was trustworthy, and I committed my soul to Him. Paul preached a living, loving Person, and he did it "from house to house."

How wonderful to see Paul, who as Saul of Tarsus went from house to house haling men and women to prison because they were followers of the Nazarene, now going from house to house preaching repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

The second phase of his ministry is the gospel of the grace of God. Now we get into Romans, the work of Christ. In Ephesians we have the gospel of the glory of God. Romans and Ephesians form the basis of the doctrine of Paul: the righteous man and the heavenly man; but we must know that we are righteous before we can know that we are heavenly. One feels that there are many amongst us who need to be established in the gospel of grace as set forth in Romans.

I remember in far off Australia, I stayed in the house of a dear young man who was very kind to me. He was well up in the latest literature, and took in all that appertains to that present ministry which we value so much; but when I got to close

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quarters with him I found that he had not peace with God. 'There were lurking doubts and fears deep down in his soul. I said to him, "My dear young friend, what you need is to spend six months in the Epistle to the Romans with God." 'There was plenty of material, and good material, in that young man's soul to build with, but there was no building going on because the foundations had not been laid.

Then we have the kingdom of God. That is a wider thought. It really takes in a wider scope of the truth of God. The kingdom of God now is righteousness established in the death of Christ, peace preached in resurrection, and joy in the Holy Ghost, which brings us to the thought that the Holy Ghost has come down here on earth to dwell in the souls of God's people to make good the truth in such souls.

Then we have all the counsel of God. We cannot get beyond that. Paul could not declare all the counsel of God to those Corinthians, they were

immature, they were carnal, but he did it to the Ephesians, because for the time being in Ephesus he had an assembly that was the living expression of his doctrine.

Now there is something else, and that is the spiritual emotions that the beloved apostle gave vent to in his ministry. You get a great deal about his tears in this portion; his tears in his gospel ministry; his tears in his church ministry, and his tears in his personal ministry. When they fell on his neck and shed tears because they should see his face no more, he mingled his tears with theirs. A good deal of the human element entered into that. The human element is right enough when kept in its right place. There are human affections, as set forth in Paul's special love to Epaphroditus in Philippians ii. In i Philippians we get divine affections. "I long after you in the bowels of Christ Jesus." The affections there go out to all, they are divine.

Then we have his tears in his church ministry. He tells those elders that

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he had warned them night and day for the space of three years with tears. He was very anxious about them because he knew the tactics of the enemy. He says elsewhere, "We are not ignorant of his devices." So he commends those Ephesians to God and the word of His grace, and we have those two resources still; nothing can touch them. Paul foresaw that after his departure grievous wolves would enter in not sparing the flock, indicating that the under shepherds were idle and not doing their duty, otherwise they would have guarded the sheep and not have allowed the wolves to enter. But there was something worse. "From among your own selves shall rise up men speaking perverted things to draw away the disciples after them."

There is not a doctrine of Christianity that has not been more or less perverted in Christendom. Truth that is perverted is the worst kind of lie. We have it all around us in the various "isms." A bit of truth here and a principle there mixed up with error.

Paul was very anxious about those Ephesians, but he was also anxious about himself, he wanted to finish his course with joy. If we want to finish our course with joy then we must work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Paul did not boast when he spoke to those elders. When he wrote his final letter to Timothy he was putting off his armour and we find him boasting. The time of his departure was at hand and he could boast. He says, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith." There he was on the battlefield of faith, the aged warrior putting off his armour, and he could boast. You remember that Ahab, king of Israel, said, "Let not him that putteth on his armour boast himself as he that putteth it off," the only wise thing he ever uttered. Paul could boast when he put off his armour, but not before. I love to think of that last chapter which Paul wrote to Timothy as representing the battlefield of faith. We get there the aged veteran dying in the moment of victory, and he

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calls for reinforcements. He sends for Timothy and tells him to bring John Mark with him and others. We have the sick and dying : “ Trophimus have I left . . . sick.” We have the deserters : “ At my first answer no man stood with me.” We have the traitors too : “ Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil.” But Paul is triumphant, prisoner though he is. He is putting off his armour and he can boast. In our dying moments, if these ever come to us, we can boast, but till then we need to go on in fear and trembling ; “ so that I may finish my course with joy,” says the apostle to those elders.

How many amongst us have gone on well for a time ; we have sat at their feet and have drunk in the ministry that has fallen from them. But where have they got to ? where are some of them now ? Building again the things which they once destroyed. It shews us that knowledge cannot keep us ; only one thing can keep us, and that is dependence. When Paul came down from the third heaven

he had more knowledge in his little finger than all the saints on earth now have. But knowledge could not keep him ; he had to receive the thorn to keep him in the place of dependence. If we are to be kept in the right place and the right path we must be dependent. We may be very simple and have very little doctrine, but if we are dependent, it will be a question then of that One keeping us who delights to keep those who in weakness depend on Him.

Then we have Paul's tears in his gospel ministry. He speaks about his *many* tears in his gospel ministry. How many tears do we shed in our gospel ministry ? I am not talking of tears shed in public ; Paul no doubt shed his tears in secret. "He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him." "Goeth forth and weepeth." That is the time to weep. What do we know about these emotions ? There are spiritual emotions. I like to hear a brother preach

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the gospel from his heart. He may not be a fine speaker, but people feel that there is a man that loves them.

Even a tear dropped in preaching may be of God and may do a great deal more than the spoken word. I remember hearing of a brother who went to see a man who was imprisoned for life. He went time after time but could make no impression on him. 'Then he thought, O Lord, I will go again, and if the result is the same I will go no more. He went again, and the result was the same ; the man was utterly indifferent. So he held out his hand and said : " Well, good-bye, John, I don't think it is much use my coming to see you, I will not come again." And he turned and went out. Just as he went John felt something hot upon his hand ; he looked at it ; it was a tear, and it touched him to the quick. " A tear ! " said he. " That man loves me, no one ever shed a tear over me since my old mother died ; that man loves me." That tear won his heart and was the means of his conversion. So we must make the people feel

that we love them. If we preach in an academic way, as a lecturer holds forth to his students, we shall not touch people's hearts.

Now just a word or two on the third phase in the history of Ephesus ; a sad phase it was too. "Remember from whence thou art fallen" says the Lord to her. She had fallen from a very great height. She was the most favoured of all the favoured assemblies in apostolic days. You can never know how far a saint has fallen until you find out the point of departure, and the point of departure is always the point of return : "Repent, and do the first works." First works are prompted by first love. There were plenty of works in Ephesus, even when the Lord spoke to her ; and when she was a fallen church, He commends her for her faith and patience. He commends those saints too because they had exercised patience and they had gone on and had not fainted ; they had not given up the truth of God as far as the doctrine was concerned ; but yet everything went

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for naught with Him, because Ephesus had left her first love ; she had got away from Him. I believe that what the Lord calls first love refers to Himself ; I think it is affection for the Person of Christ. If He had simply meant that affection had waned, He would have said, “ ‘Thy first love has left thee.’ ” But He says, “ ‘Thou hast left thy first love.’ ” It all implies that another love had come in, I think it was the world. The world had come in and had stolen the hearts of those saints away from Christ ; that is what He felt. He valued their affections more than anything else. He values ours. Think of it. He values our affections more than anything else. First love is the Person loved, but it is also the love to that Person.

Suppose a wife did all the duties that are allotted to a true wife and yet the husband felt that what was done was not prompted by first love, would that satisfy his heart ? So it is with the Lord ; and so we may be scrupulously attentive as regards outward formalities ; we may go to the

meetings, to the supper, to the reading, the gospel, and the prayer meeting, and outwardly we may be quite orthodox, but yet the Lord may have no delight in us. Why? Because He sees the affections have waned and consequently we have got away from our first love.

How are we to be kept? There is only one way. By being much in His presence. If there is any one here who wants to love the Lord more, who yearns for more personal affection for Christ, I say this, Let us be much in His company. We shall learn to love Him like that. We sometimes say about someone, "I learned to love him." We should learn to love the Lord if we were more in His company. We could not possibly be in His company without loving Him more and more, because you see He is so lovable. As we learn more and more what He is, love must increase, and if the love is not there, if we have left our first love, notwithstanding all that may be right outwardly; notwithstanding apparent orthodoxy,

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we are fallen. 'Think of it, we have left our first love, and the heart of Christ is grieved. That heart does not get from us what that heart desires.

The final phase of Ephesus is brought before us in 2 Timothy. The apostle says to Timothy, "This thou knowest, that all they which are in Asia be turned away from me ; of whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes." Ephesus had turned away from her first love and the result was that Ephesus turned away from Paul, because Paul cleaved to his first love ; he could not leave Christ. How often that has been illustrated in the history of the saints ; when some of them turn away from Christ, those who are cleaving to Him through thick and thin are necessarily turned away from too by those who have turned away from Christ.

Ephesus was a very important city ; it was the chief city of Asia Minor ; and so in Acts xix. we are told that when Ephesus received the truth all they that dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus. You see the influence which this city had ; all

that dwelt in Asia heard. And so, conversely, when Ephesus turned away, all they that were in Asia followed them. It shews the peril of a big meeting. Small meetings are more in keeping with the testimony that we are called upon to bear. A big meeting has a good deal of christian sociality in it, and ofttimes many are in just on social lines. What an influence a big meeting has on other small meetings near. That may be a blessing as long as the meeting keeps right, but when it gets wrong you find that those under the influence of that meeting often get wrong likewise.

Later on he says, "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come." We are in those perilous times (the word has been translated "difficult"), and we must not expect the times to grow less difficult. We have had divisions, and if we are left down here we shall get them again. Again and again the Lord has said to us as He said to Gideon, "The people are too many for me." And

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so there has been weeding out, and maybe there will again be a weeding out as time goes on if the Lord tarry. The times are difficult and they will become increasingly difficult. The word translated "difficult" in the New Translation is not an easy word to put into English; it is only used once again, and that is of the two demoniacs who were ferocious. (Matt. viii. 28.) We are living in ferocious times. You get the *principle* of our ferocious times in Revelation xii. 12, not yet fulfilled. Dispensations overlap! Even now the devil knows that his time is short and he is ferocious; he wants to stamp out the testimony. Well, how blessed it is to know that the Lord will maintain His testimony right on unto the end, notwithstanding all the ferocity of the enemy.

In each of the four chapters that compose this second Epistle to Timothy we have two men referred to. When the Lord sent forth the seventy, He sent them forth by two and two. Satan always follows very closely upon the work of God, and so Satan imme-

diately sends forth his emissaries by two and two. I have spoken of Phygellus and Hermogenes, and in chapter ii. we have Hymenæus and Philetus, two men, tools in the hands of Satan, who brought in wrong doctrine. In chapter iii. we have Jannes and Jambres, two men that withstood the testimony by bringing in imitations. There are imitations all around us—imitations of the testimony. Then in the last chapter we get the world coming in and engulfing everything. “Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world”; and open hostility to the truth, “Alexander the copper-smith did me much evil.”

But amid all this the apostle speaks of Onesiphorus. Whether he was one of those who was carried off his feet and who turned away from Paul with the rest of Asia, I scarcely know. It looks as though such was the case, but Paul specially prays for him, that the Lord will have mercy upon him and upon his house. Again he says, “The Lord grant unto him that he may find mercy of the Lord in that day.”

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But whether he turned away or remained true, there is this much to say, that Paul did not forget the faithfulness of Onesiphorus in the past ; neither did the Lord. Paul speaks of him as not having been ashamed of what he calls " my chain." That is all that Paul had—" my chain." No doubt he looked very insignificant in prison bound in that chain. He speaks afterwards of a " great house " ; what a contrast ! Christendom has become like a great house, pretentious in the eyes of the world. Christianity is never pretentious. Onesiphorus was not ashamed of Paul's chain. He sought him out very diligently when he was in Rome ; he had a difficulty to find him, but he did eventually. Paul remembers all this. He was just like the Lord ; the Lord never forgets the faithfulness of His people in the past. When a brother goes back the Lord does not forget the past, although we may, and it will all come out by-and-by. The wrong will come out and the brother will mourn over it ; but the

faithfulness will come out too. You remember that when Israel was rebellious and backsliding, that Jehovah said, "I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown." And Jesus said to His oft erring disciples: "Ye are they who have continued with me in my temptation"; He did not forget that.

How sweet and precious it is to know that by-and-by God will see in every one of us something to praise. Says the apostle referring to that day, "Then shall every one receive praise from God." He looks into all our hearts; He scrutinises our lives; He sees much that is wayward, much that is wilful; but if He sees anything there that is of Himself—and surely He does—He dwells on that and commends that. If we are like Him we shall do that. "If there be *any* virtue, if there be *any* praise," says the apostle "think on these things." We may look on this one and on that one with eyes that are not the eyes of Christ,

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and we may see only the wrong. Beloved brethren, let us be like Christ.

Oh, let us look for the good. Can we not see some virtue there ; something to praise. That is what we ought to dwell upon. The Lord is going to perfect in all our souls that work which He is carrying on, and by-and-by when we get into His presence He will say to every one of us, poor and feeble though we be, "Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." It will be His joy, His own joy, to see the completion of the work of grace in the souls of His people.

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MADE AND
PRINTED IN ENGLAND.

London : G. Morrish, 20, Paternoster Square, E.C.