

TRUTH *for the* LAST DAYS

No. 7.

# The Present Era:

The most wonderful in the  
world's history.

BY

DICK.

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# The Inauguration of the Present Era.

(Acts i. and ii).

THERE can be no doubt in the mind of the student of Holy Scripture that we are living in the most wonderful era in the world's history. We use the word era advisedly. Dispensations there have been and will be. Dispensations, however, speak of periods of testing, this is an era of grace. Dispensations have to do with earth and with time, whereas this era has to do with heaven and eternity.

In the two chapters to which we here call attention, there are three outstanding facts which at once establish the claim that this era is the greatest and the most wonderful in the world's history. These are:—

- (i). There is a Man in the glory of God, and there never was a man there before ;
- (ii). There is a divine Person resident in this world, and a divine Person never *resided* here before ;
- (iii). Something has been formed, the like of which never existed before, and will not exist in the same way upon earth again after this era has closed.

Let us consider these in order. It is impossible to over-estimate the importance of the two facts that there is a Man in the glory of God, and there is a divine Person resident in this world. Verses 8-11 of chapter i. demonstrate the fact that there is a Man in the glory of God. For forty days after His resurrection the blessed

Lord was seen by "His own" (i. 3). He ate before them (Luke xxiv. 41-43). He ministered to them, He conversed with them; then "He was taken up; and a cloud received Him out of their sight." Now note the words of the heavenly messengers:—"This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven" (i. 11).

The Jesus of Sychar, the Jesus of Bethany, the Jesus whose love they had known—whose sympathy and succour they had realized, whose ministry they had received—is the same Jesus in heaven to-day. Hence it is that His priestly grace and service are at the disposal of "His own" now. But this is not the whole story. When we turn to Ephesians i. 19-23, we learn that, having been "taken up into heaven," God has "set Him at His own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: and hath put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be the Head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all." Shall we try to apprehend what this means?

### **A Man sits to-day at the right hand of God.**

The first man was set by God in the place of supremacy and authority, but, because of his sin, he forfeited that place. As we view him driven out of Paradise, God dishonoured, His holiness sullied, His righteousness outraged, His creature disgraced, and His creation ruined, it seems as if He had been defeated, but our God knows no defeat, and He made the greatest tragedy the occasion for the bringing out of the infinite resources of wisdom, love and power that are found in



Himself. God had another Man in reserve. Where the first man failed the second Man triumphed; where the first Adam was so ignominiously defeated, the last Adam achieved His greatest victory. Now, with adoring hearts, we look up and see our Lord Jesus Christ, as Man, worthily filling the very highest place in the glory of God. That is the only place in the universe that is worthy of Him, and He is the only Person in the universe who is worthy to fill that place.

“Oh, the sight in heaven is glorious !  
 Man in righteousness is there;  
 Once the Victim, now victorious,  
 Jesus lives in glory fair.  
 How rightly crowned is Jesus !”—

So low did He stoop that none could go lower, so high has He been exalted that none could be higher; God “hath put all things under His feet.”

When we speak of Him as Man, need we say that we do so with the greatest possible reverence? We never can forget that He is the Eternal Son of the Eternal God, and as such we prostrate ourselves before Him in worship. Here we see the marvel of the divine plan, and herein we learn what it cost the Father and the Son before that plan could be carried out. The Eternal Son became Man in order that He might glorify God in this world where that glory had been tarnished, and that by His death and resurrection, as well as by His exaltation as Man to the right hand of God, He might reveal His love, give effect to His purposes, and introduce, on the resurrection side of death, an altogether new order of things of which He Himself should be the Head and Centre.

The second great fact is that:—

**There is a divine Person resident in this world.**

Observe the Holy Spirit is a divine Person, not an

influence, but a Person co-equal in majesty and power with the Father and the Son. Prior to Pentecost He had been a visitor to this world. As the active Agent of the Godhead, He, in the exercise of His sovereignty, chose whom He would, came upon them, used them for a special purpose, and then left them. This explains David's prayer:—"Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me" (Psa. li. 11). We could not make such a request now, because, when promising that the Holy Spirit would come, the Lord Jesus said, "He dwelleth with you, and shall be in you," and He also said, "That He may abide with you for ever" (John xiv. 16, 17).

We find then in Acts ii. that as the disciples were gathered together in the upper room, ten days after Christ's ascension, the Holy Spirit descended, filled the house, filled all who were in the house, and at once proceeded with His great work. We think it will be abundantly clear to our readers how important are these two facts. On them rests the whole super-structure of Christianity, and only in the measure in which we apprehend these facts shall we be able to understand that which is being effected at the present time.

In entering upon the consideration of fact number three, we must ask our readers to turn with us to **Matthew xvi.** and read verses 13-20. The setting of this portion of Scripture is instructive. The Lord Jesus had been rejected by the nation, and He had, for the time, rejected them. Then He let His disciples into the secret of what He was going to do. By way of introducing the subject, He asked them, "Whom do men say that I the Son of Man am?" (ver. 13). The reply showed that men's ideas then, as now, were as numerous and as varied as those who expressed them, and all wide of the mark.

Then came the question, "But whom say ye that I am?" (ver. 15), to which Peter instantly replied, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (ver. 16).

Peter was impetuous, and, like ourselves, he made mistakes, but there was no mistake here. This was not the hasty utterance of an irresponsible person, it was the revelation by the Father to his soul. Hence the reply of the Lord Jesus, "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father which is in heaven" (ver. 17). Flesh and blood could not reveal it, nor could flesh and blood receive it. Now the Lord Jesus seemed to say, "You have had a revelation from the Father, I also have a revelation to make to you," hence His words, "And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (ver. 18).

What does this mean? Peter had confessed Him as the Son of the living God. "Living" might be in contrast to the gods of the nations, or to the then existing state of things over which the pall of death rested.

We believe that it also speaks of resurrection, and therefore in Peter's first epistle we read of "a living hope" (i. 3), "a living Stone" and "living stones" (ii. 4, 5). Everything now is established in resurrection, and is consequent upon Christ, as Man, being at the right hand of God, and the Holy Spirit being here. "Upon this rock," said Christ, meaning the confession of His Person, "I will build my church." These words indicate the deity of Him who spoke. Only God can say "I will" (Exod. vi. 6-8). They further show that that of which He spoke was, at that moment, still future. Here then we have the first direct mention of the Church in the Holy

Scriptures. We know it is objected by some that He could not refer to the Church as we know it now, because that secret was "hid in God" until revealed to Paul. Certainly the secret was "hid in God," but it was God manifest in flesh who spoke. That Peter did not understand it we are prepared to admit. It seems clear that he did not understand the Father's revelation, as we may judge from Matthew xvi. 21-23, therefore he was not likely to understand the Son's revelation. There were many things, we doubt not, which the Lord said to His disciples that they did not understand at the time, and herein lies the meaning of His words, when promising that the Holy Spirit should come, "He shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said to you" (John xiv. 26). We might further ask objectors, if this does not refer to the Church as we know it now, to what did the Lord Jesus refer? Nay. This shows the large place that the Church had, and has, in the heart of our blessed Lord.

To return then to Acts ii., we find that as soon as Christ, as Man, had taken His place in heaven, and the Holy Spirit had come down, He immediately set Himself to the great work of which He had spoken to Peter. Christ in glory, and the Holy Spirit on earth, acting in perfect unison, inaugurated this wonderful new era, and the building of the Church was commenced. Thus when the Holy Spirit descended He not only filled the persons (ver. 4), but also the house (ver. 2), symbolic of the fact that the House of God in its present peculiar character was formed, and the one hundred and twenty disciples formed the nucleus of it.

We are aware that the idea of the House of God is not peculiar to Christianity, We read of it from Geneses

to Malachi. It was set up by God, it was where His glory dwelt, where His Name was placed, and where alone He was to be known. In the hands of man all had so degenerated that when Christ came He found that His Father's house had become "an house of merchandise" (John ii. 16). While He was here, He, in His own Person, superseded the House of God. In Him God dwelt, in Him the divine glory was displayed, and only through Him could God be known. Now that He is gone back to the Father He is building the House, not such as existed before, for now "the Most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands" (Acts vii. 48), but composed of "living stones" (1 Peter ii. 4, 5). Therefore we read in 1 Timothy iii. 15 of "The House of God, which is the Church of the *living* God, the pillar and ground of the truth." This seems to show that it was the Church in this character that the Lord Jesus had in mind when He uttered the words recorded in Matthew xvi. 18, that it is that which He is now building as we learn from Ephesians ii. 20, 21, while in 1 Peter ii. 5-9, we have set before us the two-fold function of those who form that House.

All this invests Acts ii. with the greatest possible interest. The result produced by the advent of the Holy Spirit caused no small stir amongst the people. God had so ordered it that Jews out of "every nation under heaven" should be found in Jerusalem just at that time. Centuries before, He had, because of the pride and presumption of His creatures, confounded their language, and "scattered them abroad upon the face of the earth" (Gen. xi. 7-8). At Pentecost He gathered men together and caused each to hear in his own tongue "the wonderful works of God" (vv. 6-11). Peter replied to the mockers in that remarkable address in which he charged home upon the nation their

awful guilt in crucifying their Messiah, and concluded with the striking words, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ (v. 36). He showed that God had completely reversed their verdict. They had given Christ a crown of thorns, God had given Him the crown of glory. They had given Him a mock sceptre, God had placed in His hand the sceptre of universal dominion. They had lifted Him up upon a cross, God had exalted Him upon His throne and had set Him there as the great Administrator of all His purposes for His saints now; for those who had rejected Him, but who would at length acknowledge Him; and for the world at large. Their consciences were reached, and as the result of their despairing cry and Peter's answer, as well as his earnest appeal, about three thousand souls crossed the line, passed over from the ranks of Christ's enemies and enrolled themselves under His authority and His beneficent sway.

Let us see what this involved. It meant that at that moment they broke the link with all their former associations, and the death of Christ separated them from all that with which they had been connected. On the day that the law was given, when Moses coming down from the Mount found that it had been already broken, and when he broke the tables of stone, "about three thousand men" perished; on the first day that grace was preached, "about three thousand" souls were saved to the glory of God. That which followed is of the deepest interest. "They continued stedfastly in the Apostle's doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (ii. 42).

The Apostle's "doctrine and fellowship" go together.

The Apostle's doctrine is found in ver. 36. As soon as they accepted that and owned the Lordship of Christ, they found themselves opposed to the world and the world opposed to them. They were, however, united together by a divinely formed and, therefore, an unbreakable bond here called "fellowship." Men form fellowships, unions, societies for the preservation and the furtherance of particular interests; and the idea contemplates the possibility of opposition. So the Christian fellowship is for the preservation and the furtherance of the interests of our Lord Jesus Christ in the scene of His rejection, and in face of the opposition that will certainly be encountered. The "breaking of bread" is the expression of the fellowship. Thus we have the fellowship in 1 Corinthians x., and the expression of it in 1 Corinthians xi. An essential for the maintenance of this is prayer. If we realized this how we should esteem the privilege of being gathered together for this purpose, and how we would pour out our hearts on behalf of His interests to Him who is "the Head of the Body, the Church" (Col. i. 18).

They were marked by simplicity, sincerity and songs, and the Lord added to their number daily.

Thus we have the inauguration of the present era, and we have the joy of knowing that the end will not be less auspicious than was the beginning. Every dispensation has ended in failure, and, if looked at only from our side, that would be the end of the present era. We deplore the failure that is everywhere so evident to-day on our side. On the Lord's side, however, all is well. "The gates of hell shall not prevail" against His Church, and the grand climax will be that He will "present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing" (Eph. v. 27).

## II.

# The Characteristics of the Present Era.

*Acts vii. 54-60; viii 1-8, 26-40; ix. 1-20 and 31.*

**A**S we pursue our study of the Acts of the Apostles, we can see divine progression. Let it be noted at once that the Apostles could not at first understand what the Lord was doing nor why He was doing it. They saw that the Gospel was achieving fresh triumphs every day, but they were not yet in the secret of His mind. It is our privilege to read this book in the light of the full revelation and, therefore, we can see how the Holy Spirit was educating those through whom He was working, and how he was preparing them for the great discovery.

Thus we can understand that on the day of Pentecost, those in the upper room, numbering "about an hundred and twenty," were "by one Spirit baptised into one Body" (1 Cor. xii. 13), and that at the close of that day, "the Church which is His Body" (Eph. i. 22-23), consisted of about three thousand, one hundred and twenty persons, but this was something that *they* had yet to learn. In the portion to which we now invite consideration, we have three characteristics of the present era, or of the Church.

- (i). Its heavenly character.
- (ii). Its heavenly witness.
- (iii). Its heavenly walk.

Stephen was "a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost" (vi. 5). What a splendid testimony! He was one of seven chosen to look after the need of some poor widows,



but with an overflowing heart he could not confine himself to this, and he seemed to be so like his Master in his life, as he was also in his death, that he raised to the full pitch the opposition of the enemies of Christ.

Chapter vi. tell us of his arrest and chapter vii. records his address before the Council. So thoroughly did he reach their consciences that they "stopped their ears," "gnashed with their teeth," "cried with a loud voice," "cast him out of the city and stoned him." So much for his foes. What about himself? "He, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God" (vv. 55, 56).

This calls for more than passing notice. The chapter opens with "the God of glory" taking account of a man upon earth (ver. 2), it closes with a man on earth looking up into the glory of God, and he saw the whole realm of glory filled by a Man. In that Man he saw the glory of God displayed. If the face of Stephen looked "as it had been the face of an angel" (vi. 15), that was the reflection of the glory that he saw, and seemed to indicate that he knew something of occupation with Christ in glory (c.f. 2 Cor. iii. 18). That upon which he looked, however, was not reflected glory, it was "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. iv. 6). This enabled him to comport himself with all the dignity of a heavenly man under extraordinary circumstances. While the stones were raining upon him, he knelt down, prayed for his enemies—how like the blessed Lord!—committed his spirit to the divine keeping and "fell asleep." The newspaper reporter would have said "they stoned him to

death"; the Holy Spirit says "he fell asleep" (v. 60). This marks a distinct stage in the book. With the death of Stephen we have the deliberate, definite, final refusal of Christ by the nation. Their answer to the offer through Peter (iii. 19-21) was, "we will not have this man to reign over us" (Luke xix. 14). Here then we find their judicial setting aside; and we can see the ground being cleared for the disclosing of that which was being and would be formed in this parenthesis in God's ways, and which will be manifested in the coming eternal ages. We also learn that the glorious Man who fills the glory of God is the One who fills the vision of those who form His Church.

We next note that with the passing of Stephen we have the introduction of Saul of Tarsus. Then we find that the persecution increased, and this was really a blessing in disguise. The work had up to this point been confined more or less to Jerusalem, and magnificent work it was. The Lord's last words to His Apostles before going to heaven were, however, "Ye shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in Judæa, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (i. 8). They would appear to have been slack in carrying that out, and the Lord permitted persecution to come. Is there not a lesson for us in this? We can thank God for the peaceful days in which our lot is cast, but we must be careful not to settle down in our cieled houses and forget His House (Hag. i. 4), otherwise He may stir up our nest.

The result of the persecution was that the Gospel did reach "Judea, and Samaria, and the uttermost part of the earth." The disciples were scattered. Philip was especially used in Samaria (viii. 5), and we doubt not he had the honour of reaping the harvest after the sowing

by our blessed Lord, of which we read in John iv. Then he was sent to meet a dusky son of Ham, and to him he preached Jesus (ver. 35). How that utter stranger to the truth was taught of God is beautifully seen in the fact that he desired to be baptized. Impressed by "the place of the Scripture which he read" (vv. 32, 33), and also, doubtless, by Philip's exposition of it, he seemed to say, "If Jesus had no place here, and His life was taken from the earth, I do not want to have any place here." Figuratively, he put the death of Christ between himself and all his former associations, and "went on his way rejoicing," to carry the glad tidings to "the uttermost part of the earth." His education as a heavenly man had surely commenced. Thus we see how the Lord secured the carrying out of His work,

In Judæa (verse 1).

In Samaria (verse 5) and

In the uttermost part of the earth (verse 39).

In chapter nine, Saul is the prominent figure. Our previous acquaintance with him had shewn him as a man who at the death of Stephen dedicated himself, his energy, his life, to the blotting out of the name of Jesus, and the exterminating of His followers. Flushed with success at Jerusalem, he departed to Damascus, there to continue his dreadful work. He was near the city. It was mid-day, "And suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: and he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?" (verses 3, 4). What a transformation immediately took place. This bold, fearless, relentless, blood-thirsty enemy of Christ and of His saints, lay prone upon the ground blind and helpless. If blinded to the things of earth, his eyes were opened to behold the

most glorious Person in the universe of God, and his ears were opened to hear the most wonderful voice that human ears have ever heard. He saw the face and he heard the voice of Him who, from the glory of God, said "*I AM JESUS.*" (ver. 5). We believe he learned two lessons that day which afterwards he never ceased to urge upon the saints.

- i. Those humble disciples were a heavenly people, because they belonged to Him, and were associated with Him whose voice he had just heard.
- ii. They were actually part of Christ Himself. The Lord Jesus asked, "Why persecutest thou *ME*?" and thus said, in effect, "When you touch these you touch *ME*."

Do we not see here in embryo, the truth of the One Body? That the Holy Spirit is here forming that Body and uniting it to Christ the living Head in heaven? Thus we are getting into the secret that the Church is heavenly in its origin as well as in its destiny. Israel was chosen on the earth and for the earth, in time and for time; the Church was chosen in heaven and for heaven, in eternity and for eternity. When the Lord instructed Ananias to go to Saul, we observe the reverence with which that disciple addressed Him. He was slow to credit the reality of Saul's conversion, (disciples are sometimes like that in these days when the Lord is working,) "But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way; for he is a chosen vessel unto Me, to bear My Name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel." (ver. 15). From Galatians i. 15, we learn that God separated him from His birth, but He was chosen in past eternal ages for salvation, for witness-bearing, for suffering, to be the vessel through whom the great truth

of the mystery should be revealed, and by whom it should be administered. (Ephesians iii. 2, 3). We doubt not that when that plan was formed in the counsel of God, and was "hid in God," then was Saul, ("who also is called Paul" xiii. 9), chosen, and just at the right moment, to the very tick of the clock, he was called, convicted, converted, and commissioned for this great work.

Whilst in all this we learn the heavenly character of the Church, we also note how in this chapter the Lordship of Christ is prominent, and, we need not say, the two things go together. Fourteen times within the compass of the thirty-one verses "the Lord" is mentioned. We are not aware that Christ is anywhere spoken of as Lord of the Assembly but it is joy of the Assembly to own Him as Lord. Because Christendom has lost, if indeed it ever knew, the truth of the Assembly, it does not acknowledge the Lordship of Christ, and the result is the religious anarchy which obtains in these days. Saul at once set about to carry out his commission, therefore we read that "Straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God." (ver. 20).

Here we have

### **The Heavenly Witness of the New Era.**

or of the Church. In saying this, do not let us be misunderstood. The Church does not preach nor does it teach, but the Church has been placed in this world as a witness for Christ. The characteristic feature of the present era is that a divine Person resides in the Assembly as the House of God, in order that through those who compose it, He may bear witness to the living Christ at the right hand of God. We observe here then a change in the character of testimony. Up to this point the

preaching of Peter has been prominent. Addressing himself, as he did, to the circumcision, he urged upon them their guilt in refusing their Messiah, and brought to them the divine offer of forgiveness. Paul's preaching at once drew attention to a blessed Person in the glory of God, set Him before them as the Son of God, and gave them to know that those who received the message were associated with Him in the place where God had placed Him. The subject of the preaching is also of special interest in view of that which was later to be made known to Paul. We have already noticed that it was consequent upon Peter's confession of Him as "the Son of the living God" that Christ said "Upon this rock"—not Peter but Peter's confession—"I will build My Church." Now the One chosen to tell us all about the Church, commences his service for the Lord Jesus by preaching that "He is the Son of God." The foundation of the Church, the Chief Corner Stone of the Church, the Head of the Church, the Object of the delight of those who compose the Church, and the Witness through the Church are all centred in the Son of God.

We find the third characteristic of the New Era, or of the Church, in verse thirty-one. "Then had the Churches rest throughout all Judæa and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified: and WALKING in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied."

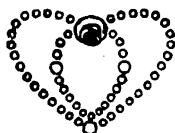
We have already observed that the Church is heavenly in its origin and also as to its destiny. Here we learn that the Lord would have it to be heavenly in its present character as manifested in the walk of the saints. It is eminently desirable that we should be intelligent as to the precious truth that we have been

considering, but the measure in which we have got it individually in power in our souls, is not greater than the measure in which it is expressed in our walk. To have intellectual acquaintance with the truth and to be able to give a lucid exposition of it is one thing, to walk in truth is quite another thing and after all it is walk, not talk, that counts. In the epistles that set forth the truth of the Church the Holy Spirit urges upon the saints that they should walk worthy of the vocation wherewith they have been called. (Ephesians iv. 1). If the Church is set here, as it is, to be descriptive of Christ, we can see that it will be as those who form it seek to "walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing," (Col. i. 10), that this will be realized. Oh that we might apprehend how high, how holy, how heavenly is our calling!

Be it observed those early disciples walked "in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost." In other words they walked as heavenly people in this world, and they were supported by all the resources of the Lord, and were maintained by the power of the Holy Spirit. We had the opportunity one day of watching a diver at work. Dressed in his diving suit, he stepped over the side of the boat and disappeared from view under the water. He passed from an element that was natural to him, to one that was quite unnatural. The only way in which he could be sustained in the place to which he did not belong, was by breathing the atmosphere of the place to which he did belong. This he was enabled to do by a man at the top ceaselessly pumping down oxygen. Had that man failed, or had the supply been exhausted it would have meant instant death. We have been sent into this world, (John xvii.

18), to walk, to witness, to work in a place to which we do not belong; and we can be maintained here only as we breathe the atmosphere of the place to which we do belong. May we say it very reverently?—The Man at the top will never fail us, and the supply of heavenly grace and power, and all else that we need, will never be exhausted; for is it not written “In Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and ye are complete in Him, which is the Head of all principality and power,”? (Col. ii. 9, 10), therefore all is well.

One point more remains to be noticed; that is, that as a result of their so walking they “were multiplied.” In chapter two we have got addition, in chapter nine we have got multiplication. These are the only two rules in divine arithmetic. Some, in their folly, have attempted to produce a revised arithmetic and have added division, but the Lord knows nothing of this, it is hateful to Him. Is it not possible that if we had known more of the joy of “walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost” there would have been produced more edification, and it would have resulted in greater multiplication? Shall we seek that if there should yet be a brief interval before our beloved Lord returns, we, as individuals, might be found thus walking, so that we might be edified, our fellow-believers might be encouraged, and the number of “His own” might be multiplied.





### III.

## The Central Fact of the Present Era.

*Acts x. 1-48 ; xi. 19-30 ; xiii 1-3, 46-49 ; xv. 13-14.*

**W**E now come to what may well be termed the central fact of the present era and the central feature of God's great plan. The door was about to be opened to the Gentiles. That being so, we can understand why Peter appears again on the scene.

When he received the revelation, as recorded in Matthew xvi. 16-18, the Lord Jesus also gave him a commission. Thus we read in ver. 19, "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven : and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven : and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." It will be observed that Christ spoke not of the keys of the Church, as is erroneously taught in some quarters, but of the keys of the kingdom of heaven. We have seen how Peter carried out the first part of his commission in Acts ii., when he opened the door to the Jews and they entered by the thousand. After that he had to open the door to the Gentiles, and then the record is occupied with the recently-converted Saul of Tarsus, who became the Apostle of the Gentiles.

Now while Peter would be very willing to preach the Gospel to the Jews, we could understand him being not quite so eager to carry the glad tidings to the Gentiles. National prejudice, racial distinction, and religious animosity had to be broken down. The tender, patient, gracious way in which the incomparable Master dealt with His servant is beautiful to witness. The story of

how the blessing reached Cornelius and his house naturally divides itself into four chapters.

Chapter one extends from x. 1-8, and there we find the Lord preparing Cornelius. He was a pious man, and as to his moral and religious character it might seem as if there was nothing more to be desired, but he was not saved (xi. 14). He could not be saved until he knew the Saviour, and he could not know the Saviour until he had heard about Him, for "How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent?" (Rom. x. 14, 15). No sooner did Cornelius receive the message through the heavenly visitor than he sent two trusted servants and a devout soldier to fetch Peter, and here ends chapter one.

The preparation of Peter for this special mission, by far the most difficult part of the whole proceeding, forms the subject of chapter two. Peter, going up to the housetop to pray, "became very hungry," and "while they made ready, he fell into a trance" (vv. 9, 10). Then he had the vision recorded in vv. 11-16, with the details of which we are familiar. Without indulging in speculation, or seeking a detailed explanation of the meaning of this vision, there are certain things which are quite apparent because they lie on the surface.

(i). This "vessel," which was like "a great sheet," came out of heaven (ver. 11), and it "was received up again into heaven" (ver. 16). We can understand some person exclaiming, "Surely, there will not be any wild beasts in heaven!" No, but there will be those in heaven who, metaphorically, were wild beasts upon earth. Was not Saul of Tarsus a wild beast when he was "exceedingly mad" against the disciples of the Lord Jesus? Heaven

will be filled with those who, when on earth, were deep-dyed sinners, until numbered amongst those whom God had cleansed (ver. 15) in "the precious blood of Christ." It may be objected, "But these came out of heaven." Yes, and they also were "received up again into heaven" (vv. 11, 16). The reason that we are going to heaven is because we belong to heaven; we have been fitted for heaven; and—may we say it?—heaven is the only place fit for us. We were chosen in heaven and for heaven as we have already remarked; and if the intrusion of sin seemed to bar the way, the death of Christ has removed the barrier, and His blood has given us an incontestable title to be there.

"Our title to glory  
We read in Thy blood."

(ii). The vessel was "as it had been a great sheet knit at *the four corners*, and let down to the earth" (ver. 11). Whatever else this may mean, it indicates the universality of the Gospel. The Lord was showing Peter that that which he had preached on the day of Pentecost, which really refers to Israel in a day still future, but which he rightly applied to his hearers that day, viz.:—"Whosoever shall call on the Name of the Lord shall be saved" (ii 21) included both Jews and Gentiles, as *we* learn from Rom. x. 13.

(iii). When in reply to his objection to obeying the word "Kill and eat" (ver. 13), that he had "never eaten anything common or unclean" (ver. 14), the Lord said, "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common" (ver. 15), Peter was to learn (that which he would better understand later) that in the death of Christ every distinction had been removed. Having learned his lesson the Lord told Peter that there were three men at the gate

seeking him ; and, in effect, his instructions were, " Ask no questions, raise no difficulties, go with them, *for I have sent them* " (ver. 20). Having gone down to meet them, and having ascertained their business, Peter took them in and lodged them for the night, and here ends chapter two.

In chapter three we see him starting out on this great mission. Anticipating that on his return he might have to give an account of such an unheard of and extraordinary action, he took six brethren with him (c.f. x. 23 ; xi. 12). Arrived at the house of Cornelius, he explained how unusual was his action, gave his divine authority for it, and learned in detail *for the first time* the object of his mission. Here closes chapter three.

In chapter four we find a prepared servant addressing a prepared company. He spoke of the word sent by God to the children of Israel, " preaching peace by Jesus Christ," and quickly added " He is Lord of all " (ver. 36). Thus Acts x. 36 is the amplification of Acts ii. 36, and from it Peter showed that there was blessing for the Gentiles. He then gave a most exquisite epitome of the life of Jesus (ver. 38) ; spoke of His death and resurrection, set Him forth as the One " ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead " (ver. 42), and proclaimed " remission of sins " through faith in His Name (ver. 43). Whether Peter had concluded his address or was interrupted we know not, but just then, " While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word " (ver. 44).

We should not be surprised if even Peter was astonished as he looked upon these people " which," said he, " have received the Holy Ghost as well as we " (ver. 47), and as " he commanded them to be baptized in

the name of the Lord" (ver. 48), thus bringing them on to the same ground, and into the same place of blessing that he and his brethren occupied. Thus ends chapter four of this entrancing story, and just here there opens a chapter in the history of the new era which will not close until the Lord comes for "His own."

The early portion of chapter xi. shows how "the apostles and brethren that were in Judæa" were filled with consternation when they heard what had happened, and when Peter returned, his action was called in question. As they listened however, to Peter's account, "They held their peace, and glorified God, saying, 'Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life (ver. 18). No sooner did they see how manifestly it was all of God, than they withdrew their charges, rejoiced with Peter, and glorified God. After all, they were not by any means indifferent to, nor unmoved by anything that was of Himself and for His glory. Would it not be well if instead of thinking that our brethren are censorious when at times they may not agree with us, we gave them credit for seeking the glory of Christ?"

Next we see how the Gospel reached Antioch. Some disciples,—nameless so far as the inspired record is concerned, but known to the Lord,—preached there with splendid results. Barnabas went to see them, and, "When he . . . had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord." (xi. 23).

There also the disciples were first called Christians, (ver. 26); and their Christianity was shown in a very practical way; for hearing of a "great dearth" that should be throughout all the world: they determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judæa."

(ver. 28, 29). They knew nothing yet as to the truth of the One Body; yet they acted on the principle that "Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it." (1 Corinthians xii. 26).

To this place Barnabas brought Saul, and from this point events seem to move rapidly, with Saul, afterwards called Paul, as the prominent figure. In chapter xiii. 1-4, we read that as "Certain prophets and teachers . . . ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate Me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So they, *being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed.*"

This was not ordination but identification, not human appointment but fellowship. We have already observed that the Assembly does not preach nor teach, but the Assembly, or it may be, as in this instance, a few of the Lord's servants, gladly seek to be associated with those whom the Holy Spirit sends forth. Such will deeply appreciate—yea they will covet—such fellowship; nor will they risk alienating it by a course of action that may have the appearance of zeal, forgetting that that is not necessarily a criterion of being "sent forth by the Holy Ghost." This chapter then records the first missionary journey of Barnabas and Saul, who is for the first time called Paul, (ver. 9), and it is from this point that Paul seems to take precedence. Having arrived at Antioch in Pisidia, and the testimony having been refused by the Jews, Paul and Barnabas deliberately declared that they turned to the Gentiles. (ver. 46, 47). As their warrant for this they quoted words which in Isaiah xlix. 6 and in Luke ii. 32 refer to our Lord Jesus Christ, and

just here we get a further hint as to how the great divine plan was being worked out.

Now however, the apostles and elders found themselves in the presence of a difficulty. They could understand the glad tidings being preached to, and received by the Jews, for were they not the objects of God's special favour? The Gospel might be preached in Samaria; there might be an odd case such as the Ethiopian eunuch receiving the good news; and though the incident of the work in the house of Cornelius might be difficult to explain it was clearly something extraordinary. Here however, were these two servants of the Lord, "sent forth by the Holy Ghost," who had definitely and publicly announced that they turned to the Gentiles; nor could they gainsay the fact of the "Miracles and wonders *God had wrought* among the Gentiles by them" (xv. 12).

We may not be able easily to appreciate this, but to them the difficulty was very real, and apparently insurmountable. Jews and Gentiles were as far apart as the poles in every sense of the word. Nationally, religiously, socially, there was nothing in common between them; and the feeling of hatred entertained by one race was heartily reciprocated by the other. Some were prepared to compromise; very magnanimously they seemed to say, "we will receive them on certain conditions; if they are willing to be 'circumcised after the manner of Moses,' they can associate with us; if they do not agree to that, not only can we have nothing to do with them, but they 'cannot be saved'" (xv. 1). Here then was a crisis of the first magnitude. Now Peter was a Jew whose consistency none could impeach, and, in that respect, Paul was his equal, but evidently they agreed that the way out of the impasse was not to be found in that direction.

"The apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter" (ver. 6). Peter recounted his remarkable experience, Barnabas and Paul reported on their mission, and what could the apostles and elders say? James expressed his judgment (vv. 13-21) and this was afterwards endorsed by "the whole Church" (ver. 22). May we remark, parenthetically, that this gives us some light as to Assembly order. The Assembly did not *deliberate*, nor did the apostles and elders *legislate* for the Assembly. To bring it down to days of brokenness like the present, when "two or three" gathered to the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ may enjoy Assembly privileges, and must therefore accept Assembly responsibilities, a few brothers of mature years, and who have a care for the saints, deliberate in the presence and in the fear of the Lord; wait upon Him to reveal His mind, then they refer the matter to the gathering of which they form part, who, gathered to His Name and in His Name give effect to that judgment which He has indicated. This just by the way.

To return to our subject. James did not yet know the full truth as to the Church for it had not been revealed, but speaking, as he did, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, he used the very word that expressed that of which he was still unaware. The word for Church is *Ecclesia*, which means called out. Ver. 14 tells us that James said, "Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to *take out* of them a people for His Name."

It may be asked, "If James was ignorant of the real meaning of this, wherein lies its special significance?" Just here, that in the same way that Matthew xvi. shows the large place the Church had in the Lord's heart, so in



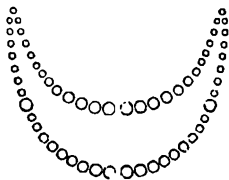
this chapter we see the place that it had in the mind of the Holy Spirit; and how He was preparing them for that which was soon to be disclosed to them.

We need to turn to Ephesians ii. and there read the doctrinal unfolding, in order to see how the difficulty that we have been considering had been anticipated and met. We learn that at the Cross the entire history of man after the flesh was once and for ever judicially ended before God, all distinctions of every conceivable kind were removed, and Jews and Gentiles were reconciled unto God in one Body (Eph. ii. 16). A problem that it passed the wit of man to settle had been solved by God, not on the principle of amalgamation which leads nowhere, but by introducing a new order where there should be neither Jews nor Gentiles, but one Body on earth united by the Spirit to Christ the living Head in heaven. When a Jew is converted he ceases to be a Jew, and when a Gentile is converted he ceases to be a Gentile. Before Pentecost the human race was divided into two families, Jews and Gentiles. Since that time God has been taking out from amongst Jews and Gentiles "a people for His Name." So that in the world at the present time there are Jews, and Gentiles, and the Church of God (1 Cor. x. 32). How happy it is for us to read the Acts of the Apostles in the light of the full revelation, and to see how the Lord's servants worked under His guidance, and in subjection to the Holy Spirit, without knowing at the time what was in His mind.

May we venture an illustration of what we mean. In the central street of a large city we see a hoarding erected. Curiosity leads us to look inside and we see a collection of stone and lime, bricks and mortar, timber, etc., while men of varied trades are busy at work.

Observing a man who seems to know all about it, we say, "We cannot understand this, all seems to us to be a mass of confusion." He takes us into his temporary office, unlocks his desk, takes out a plan, spreads it before us, and asks, "What do you think of that?" "Why! a magnificent building," we exclaim, "but what is the connection between this and that?" "Just this," he replies, "that if you should be passing here twelve months hence, you will see a building that will answer in every detail to that plan." "Do your workmen know that?" we ask. "No," he answers, "but *I* know, *I* am directing operations, *I* am working to plan, each man is doing his bit, and when the workmen see the result they will be glad that they have had a hand in it."

Our parable is easy of interpretation. The workers in the Acts of the Apostles were each doing their bit without knowing exactly why, but the blessed Lord knew. Here our illustration, like most illustrations, fails. To-day we may know, for the plan is fully revealed. We may have a very feeble conception of what the building will be like, but we look on to that day when it will be completed, when it will be manifested to a wondering universe, and when there shall be for God "Glory in the Church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen." (Eph. iii. 21).



#### IV.

## The Demands and Difficulties of the Present Era.

*Acts xix. 8-10; xx. 6-12, 17-38.*

**WE** now reach the climax of the present era as far as the account of its history in the Acts of the Apostles is concerned. We have no authority for saying that the great truth of the mystery had been revealed prior to the incident in chapter xix. to which we call attention. We have no hesitation, however, in stating that the grand secret of eternity must have been disclosed to the Apostle Paul, and must have been communicated by him to the saints previous to his address to the elders of Ephesus given to us in chapter xx. He could not have spoken about "the Church of God" and "all the counsel of God" had he not known about it, and had not those to whom he spoke been informed with regard to it. In chapter xix. we see how, as we noticed on a previous occasion, the Holy Spirit was educating the Apostle and the saints in view of the revelation that was about to be made. Paul having laboured in the synagogue "for the space of three months," and having encountered opposition, "He departed from them, and separated the disciples, disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus" (ver. 9).

It may be that Paul took this step not simply because opposition drove him out, but because he was conscious that the Lord was calling him out. It is well for us to realise that the truth makes demands upon us.

It is not sufficient to read the precious unfolding of truth in the sacred volume—necessary as that is—to peruse the exposition of it in books and magazines, nor to listen to addresses dealing therewith, valuable as these may be, to give it a mental assent, to say “we hold it,” nor even to be able to set it forth more or less clearly. The measure in which we answer to its demands, and in which we express it in our life and practice, is the measure of our apprehension of it.

Here then, we seem to have the first demand of the new era, and that is

### SEPARATION.

For those disciples to leave the synagogue and go to the schoolroom must have been a severe test. They had virtually been born and brought up in the synagogue. To them it represented a divinely-sanctioned institution. To leave that for a humble schoolroom was no small matter. We could understand the curl of the lip, and the look of mingled pity and contempt, with which former friends would meet them as the latter went to their fine building, and the former passed into their insignificant resort. To add to the indignity of it all, it was “the school of one Tyrannus,” who was a Gentile, and there both Jews and Gentiles assembled (ver. 10). To the schoolroom, however, they went, and, so far as we know, *they did not return to the synagogue.*

Is there not in this a lesson for us? If we understand that we, having been born again, cleansed by Christ’s precious blood, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, form part of “the Church of God” (xx. 28); and if we discover that that is the only Church that He recognizes, we will eschew association with any merely man-made religious organisation. If connected with such, we will hear the

call of the Holy Spirit, "Let us go forth therefore unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach" (Heb. xiii. 13). Having gone forth, we will not seek to go back, not even on an occasional visit, because if we were to go back we must necessarily leave Him in order to do so. We will seek to avoid bringing reproach upon Him by any peculiarities of ours, but we will esteem it an honour to bear "His reproach" by reason of being loyal to Him. There is in the portion we have been considering the further fact that the disciples were learning a lesson, the full significance of which they would understand later, namely, that those who, prior to their conversion, had been Jews and Gentiles, could be gathered together, because they were members of the one Body.

In xx. 7, we find that the disciples at Troas, though they might not yet know fully the truth about the Assembly, were actually already functioning as the Assembly, for "Upon the first day of the week...the disciples came together to break bread." The Assembly is not merely a vast organism existing in this world, but there is such a thing as those who compose it being gathered together in Assembly (1 Cor. xi. 18). That means that the Lord Jesus Christ, as "the Head of the Body, the Assembly" (Col. i. 18), calls His own together for a definite purpose. We should be able to give *Him* a reason if we are not present on such occasions. *He* is there, *He* is in the midst, *He* controls all that is done, and it is in order that we may meet *Him*, and, still more wonderful, that *He* may meet us, that *He* calls us together. There would appear to be four such gatherings indicated in the Holy Scriptures, and these are:—

- (i). To eat the Lord's Supper. 1 Cor. xi.
- (ii). Inferentially, and we think it is a just inference,

for prayer. Matt. xviii. 19, 20.

(iii). For edification. 1 Cor. xiv.

(iv). For discipline. 1 Cor. v.

If this were realized, there would be as many at the meeting for prayer as at the meeting for the breaking of bread. Our attendance at the meeting for edification would not be governed by the question, "Who will be there?" but by the fact that the Lord will be there; nor would we absent ourselves on the rare occasions when it might be necessary to exercise discipline. We would just add that this has not been abrogated by the ruin with which we find ourselves surrounded, and to which we have so materially contributed. If number four is inoperative so are the three preceding gatherings, for each of them contemplates saints gathered together in Assembly. We have already referred to Matthew xviii. 20, which has been called "The charter of the Church in all ages." There we read the precious words of the Lord Jesus Christ, which, we think, He uttered in view of a day of failure like the present. "For where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them." He gathers together, He takes His place in the midst, and those whom He gathers, He empowers to act in His Name as He may be pleased to direct.

To return to our chapter, we learn that on the particular occasion referred to, Paul was present and preached, continuing his speech until midnight. We read in ver. 9 that "There sat in a window a certain young man named Eutychus, being fallen into a deep sleep: and as Paul was long preaching, he sunk down with sleep, and fell down from the third loft, and was taken up dead." We do not think this has been recorded

simply that we might learn that in the course of a long address some person fell asleep. The number of such cases is probably legion. Might we not learn from this yet another demand of the present era? Eutychus was a young man, and his name means "Prosperous." Life was doubtless opening out before him. Could he have feared that if he followed in the path indicated by Paul's ministry, it would cut right through all his cherished ambitions, and the narrow path might seriously interfere with his hope of prosperity? Was it not possible to be a good Christian and at the same time be a prosperous man of the world? Be that as it may, he slept in presence of Paul's ministry.

Certainly he seemed to be representative of those of whom Paul, later, wrote to Timothy, "This thou knowest, that all they which are in Asia be turned away from me." "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world." "At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me" (2 Tim. i. 15; iv. 10, 16). We have no reason to think that these people gave up Christianity or the outward observance of it, but they were not prepared for the second demand of the present era, and that is

### SEPARATION FROM THE WORLD.

Paul's path was too narrow for them, and to accept it might endanger their prosperity. Why should they not attend to the Lord's things on the Lord's day, and associate with the world, its politics, its pleasures, and its various other pursuits during the week? Anyhow, *they* "sunk down with sleep" in presence of Paul's ministry.

Shall we bring this down to date? Quite early in the last century there was a remarkable revival of the truth.

- (i). As to the Church as the Body of Christ ;
- (ii). As to the heavenly calling of the saints ; and
- (iii). As to the coming of the Lord for His own.

This marked a distinct epoch. Clergymen put off their canonicals, gave up their livings and stepped out, literally not knowing whither they went. Men of position renounced their former worldliness, ladies of rank took off their jewels and outward adornment, and were noted for their modest apparel. All this showed that they had not merely got an intellectual acquaintance with the truth, but that it had been built into their souls, had produced a formative effect ; and it marked a turning point in their lives. They had indeed to "buy the truth" (Prov. xxiii. 23), and they were not prepared to sell it. They had heard the call, to which we have already referred, "Let us go forth therefore unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach" (Heb. xiii. 13). They had to bear His reproach, but, like the Apostles, they "rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His Name" (Acts v. 41). We, in our day, have come in for the precious heritage that they have left to us. What are we doing with it ?

Measured by that somewhat remote date we are young, and, it may be, we want to be prosperous. It may be asked, "If Eutychus and his brethren went to sleep in Paul's day, is it surprising if believers go to sleep in this day ?" It is inexcusable under any circumstance, but, if possible our guilt is the greater. We find ourselves, as we have already observed, in the light of the full revelation, with the complete Word of God in our hands ; and, as we have remarked, the possessors of this heritage left to us by men of God whose memory we revere. We believe there is a clarion call to us to-day,



as there was to the much-favoured Ephesian saints in their day, "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light" (Eph. v. 14).

We pass on now to the closing portion of chapter xx. This is invested with special interest.

- (i). Because, as we have previously noticed, the great truth with regard to the Church must, by that time, have been revealed to Paul, and must have been communicated by him to those whom he was addressing, and
- (ii). Because this gives us, so far as we are aware, Paul's last recorded oral ministry to the saints. So that here we have his valedictory spoken message, just as in his second epistle to Timothy we get his concluding written word.

Paul reminded his hearers of the nature of his service amongst them. He called attention to the two-fold character of his ministry. He testified "the gospel of the grace of God" (ver. 24), and the two prominent features of that were, "repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (ver. 21). Then he also declared "all the counsel of God" (ver. 27), and this clearly included the truth of the Church, as the next verse shows.

Here then we have the divine order. It is by the preaching of the gospel that the Church is being formed. God might have chosen some other means, but He has not done so. He has so ordered it that thus this great work should be accomplished. What dignity this gives to the preaching of the gospel. The joy of God when sinners are saved is not only because they have been rescued from a lost eternity, but because His counsels are

being fulfilled, and the completion of the Church is being brought appreciably nearer. So the preacher goes forth, humbled, yet rejoicing that he should be permitted to have any little part in this great work. His work, like that of Pastors and Teachers, has the Body in view (Eph. iv. 11, 12). He does not preach about the Church, but he preaches what Paul preached, and, in the light of the purpose of God, he rejoices when souls are saved. Thus we see that the more we are divinely instructed as to the Church, the more earnest will we be in the work of the gospel. If we do not preach, we will pray for and encourage those who do. Preachers will not introduce extraneous methods to make meetings "attractive," because they will be conscious that nothing can add to the attractiveness of the gospel, and their confidence will be not in human "methods," but in the power of God. Then there are those whom the Lord has fitted to instruct and care for His own. Thus Evangelist, Pastor, and Teacher work hand in hand. The one does not criticize the other, but each realize that they are necessary the one to the other, and that it is their privilege to do their work in subjection to the Holy Spirit, and under the direction of the living Head in heaven.

Verse 28 shows us the preciousness of the Church, and the tender solicitude of God for that which is so dear to His heart. It was spoken of by Paul as "the Assembly of God, which He has purchased with the blood of His Own" (New Trans). This, which, obviously, is the correct rendering, is one of those unfinished sentences that we come across here and there in Paul's writings. We can finish it, can we not? His own Beloved One, His own Son. We have already observed that in Matthew xvi. the Lord Jesus is said to have spoken of the

Church as "My Church." Here it is called "the Church of God." How beautiful this is! It is "the Church of God" because God conceived and designed the marvellous plan in past eternal ages. "The blood of His Own" tells us of how the intrusion of sin that threatened to defeat the divine purpose was perfectly met. It also lets us into the secret of the infinite cost at which God secured that which He had given as His own love-gift to His beloved Son. Now as Man in glory the Son claims it, and joyfully exclaims, "My Church." Hallelujah!

Now, said the Apostle to those elders, Feed it. Alas! How much time has been wasted in fighting that should have been spent in feeding, and while those who should have been feeding have been fighting, the Flock has been starving. May the work of fighting be abandoned, and may the few moments that may remain ere the Lord shall come be devoted to feeding.

Just as we have learned two demands of the present era, so here we discover two difficulties.

- (i). "Grievous wolves" from without (ver. 29).
- (ii). Seducers from within (ver. 30).

Thus we read in ver. 29, "For I know this, that after My departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock." This may refer, to those who would come as "false prophets in sheep's clothing, but inwardly," said Christ, "they are ravening wolves" (Matt. vii. 15). Of such both Paul and John had to write later under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. That such are numerous to-day is very apparent, and their efforts to corrupt the beloved Flock of God are too obvious to be mistaken.

Next, we read in ver. 30, "also of your own selves shall

men arise, speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after them." The Ephesian elders would probably not have been surprised to hear of foes from without, but we think they would be astonished to be told of men arising from within. Yet this actually happened, and before his departure Paul saw the commencement of the break-up of that which he had been used to build up. We know well how history has repeated itself, and from then till now there have been men who have gathered round themselves little coteries of people who subscribed to their views, and who refused all association with those who did not.

The Apostle did not in the least minimize the difficulties, but he did not leave his hearers there. In concluding his memorable address, he showed them their unfailing resource, viz. :—

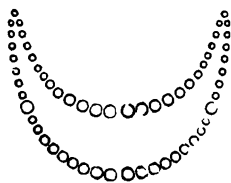
"GOD AND THE WORD OF HIS GRACE (ver. 32).

Though he who had ministered to them was leaving them, and expected that "they should see His face no more" (vv. 25, 38), he could confidently leave them having commended them to God and to the Word of His grace. This was the resource of the saints at Pentecost in the pristine days. No more and no less, this was to be their resource in the difficult times here predicted by Paul: this was the resource of persecuted saints in early days, and this is our resource now, thank God!

The demands may seem stringent; the difficulties may be great; the path may be narrow; the road may be rough; the night may be dark; the number of those who desire to be true to Christ may be few; but we have "God, and the Word of His grace. If we apprehend that and draw upon that Resource, we will be enabled to face

the demands and to meet the difficulties; we will be prepared for the path; we will not fear the roughness of the road; we will be happy with the few; the eye of faith will pierce the darkness of the night, will see the close of this wonderful era upon earth, and the dawning of the morning of that eternal day when Christ shall present the Church to Himself "a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing" (Eph. v. 27).

May our hearts be encouraged, may our footsteps be quickened, and may we esteem, and walk worthy of the privilege of being permitted to live in this wonderful period of the most wonderful era in the world's history.





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