

The title is rendered in a bold, 3D, blocky font. The word 'BACK' is on the top line, 'FROM' is in the middle line, and 'BABYLON' is on the bottom line. The letters are white with black outlines and shading to create a three-dimensional effect. To the right of the text, there is a white line drawing of a building with a tower and arched windows. The background is a dark blue gradient with a white, textured horizontal band across the middle.

**BACK**  
**FROM**  
**BABYLON**

**by W. RODGERS**

**BACK**

*from*

**BABYLON**

*by*

**W. RODGERS**

## **BOOK REVIEW.**

**"Back from Babylon."** Some years ago our contributor, Wm. Rodgers, published a series of articles in our pages, and these were acknowledged then as most timely. Lessons for the present day were drawn from the books written after the Hebrew remnant returned from the Babylonian Captivity. Mr. Rodgers, in small compass, gave a splendid resume of the contents of these books, and, with the wisdom of a skilful physician diagnosed many of the ills affecting the Christian Church to-day. He pleaded for a wider separation from the world, and for a closer adherence to the pattern for individual and communal behaviour announced in the New Testament. These papers, at the request of many friends, have now been published in book form. We hope that the messages will have a wider sphere of influence, and will be followed by the blessing of the Lord. Published by John Ritchie, Ltd.

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# BACK FROM BABYLON

LESSONS FROM A GREAT REVIVAL  
OF OLDEN TIMES

BY

WILLIAM RODGERS

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## FOREWORD

THESE chapters, originally written as a series of articles for the *Believers Magazine* of 1934, at the request of its then Editor, Mr. Hoste, are now being issued in book form in accordance with the expressed wish of a number of friends. They make no claim to be a sustained exposition of the post-captivity books of the Old Testament with which they deal, but aim at pointing out, in a manner suggestive rather than full, those features in them which emphasize the similarity between their times and our own; and which, in consequence, contain important lessons both for our warning and for our encouragement. That these lessons may be taken to heart and acted upon, is the desire of the writer and of his friends referred to above.

W. R.





## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
FOREWORD . . . . .	v
I. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	9
II. AN OLD-TIME REVIVAL . . . . .	15
III. THE HAND OF GOD . . . . .	21
IV. THE ADVERSARIES . . . . .	25
V. GIFTS DIFFERING . . . . .	29
VI. ANOTHER WITNESS . . . . .	35
VII. HOW SIN WAS DEALT WITH . . . . .	39
VIII. NEHEMIAH'S PRAYERS . . . . .	45
IX. MORE OF NEHEMIAH'S PRAYERS . . . . .	51
X. BUILDING THE WALL . . . . .	57
XI. TALKERS, TRAITORS AND PLOTTERS . . . . .	63
XII. A GREAT BIBLE READING . . . . .	69
XIII. THE MAN WHO BOWED NOT . . . . .	75
XIV. THE MESSAGE OF MALACHI . . . . .	81
XV. THE FAILURE OF THE PRIESTHOOD . . . . .	86
APPENDIX . . . . .	91



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“WHATSOEVER things were written aforetime were written for our learning” (Rom. xv. 4), so there can be no part of the history of Israel, as recorded in the Old Testament, from which God’s people to-day may not learn something. But perhaps no stage of that history contains teaching more suitable for present-day needs, and exhibits more striking correspondences between their circumstances and our own, than that which is given us in the narratives of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, and in the writings of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the prophets of this period.

The story of the captives who returned from Babylon to set up the temple, and to restore and build Jerusalem, has its counterpart in that of God’s people who, during the last hundred years or so, have come out from what was virtually a Babylonish captivity, that they might occupy the place to which the Word of God called them, and might be free to walk in obedience to its commands.

Each of the two movements had its rise in the hearts of a number of men who had been exercised by the Word of God as to their position, “men whose spirits God had raised” (Ezra i. 5). Each was characterized by a similar godly zeal amongst the earlier leaders, and

by a realization on their part of their utter weakness, and a counting upon God for His help. In each there was more than the mere coming out from what was evil—there was a definite turning to God's centre for His people, the place where He had chosen to put His Name; a material centre in the one case, a spiritual centre in the other. Alike they were also in this respect, that there was at both times diligent searching of the Scriptures, and earnest endeavour to carry out at all costs what was "found written" therein. Even the truths thus learnt in each case had a similarity, and produced like effects on the lives of those concerned. On the one hand they engendered carefulness as to keeping God's feasts in a scriptural manner, and on the other hand they led to a clearly defined separation from the ungodly peoples around. In both these respects the two companies went far beyond the greatest and best leaders of earlier periods; than Samuel, David, Solomon, Hezekiah; than Luther, Calvin, Knox, Wesley. For example, when the returned captives kept the feast of tabernacles in booths, as it had been commanded in Lev. xxiii. 40-42, we read that "since the days of Jeshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so" (Neh. viii. 17). And again when Nehemiah was deprecating marriages with the heathen on the ground of Deut. xxiii. 3, 4, he could say, "Did not Solomon, King of Israel, sin by these things, yet among many nations was there no king like him" (Neh. xiii. 26).

As might be expected, persecution and scorn from those around them were the common lot of those who, at the one time or at the other, sought to walk in the

path of obedience to God's Word in these matters; and when each movement developed somewhat, trouble also began to be experienced from the crookedness and worldliness of some within their own ranks. Among the returned exiles the final development was that almost universal departure from God, which we find pictured in the book of Malachi. How far the present-day movement may be about to turn in that same sad direction, let those who are spiritual judge.

In this connection, it is worth while to note the order we find in the two books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The one contains the story of the building of the House, the other, that of the building of the city wall, and, as is fitting, the building of the House comes first. It suggests right attitude of soul toward God, while the other suggests right attitude toward the heathen outside. In the one case God gets His place, in the other Moabites, Ammonites, etc., are kept in their place. Both were manifestations of the same soul-exercise, what one might call an inward and an outward manifestation of it. The inward one, as we have said, comes first, for if not, whether then or now, the outward becomes mere sectarianism. Yet on the other hand, if one claims to give the Lord His place, without giving any outward manifestation of separation from evil, it is but hypocrisy. For, then and now, the friendship of the world is enmity with God.

It is also an interesting fact that the need for the wall does not seem to have been so apparent at first as it came to be later, when many of the original company of returned exiles had passed from the scene. This does not imply that it was any the less a work of God. The

men who built the wall were just as really carrying out His will for them at the time they did it, as the men who years before had built the temple. They could just as easily have given Scriptures for what they were engaged in (see Dan. ix. 25; also Jer. xxxi. 38, compared with Neh. iii. 1). And the very adversaries who opposed them had to acknowledge that "this work was wrought of our God" (Neh. vi. 16).

Yet it is not difficult to imagine a critic saying to Nehemiah, "It is merely bigotry and sectarianism, this wall-building idea of yours, Nehemiah, the others who came before you did not do it. You are bringing the people of God into bondage." Such critics did in fact exist, chiefly among the well-to-do folks and the nobles, whose families had already made alliances with the heathen. They both hindered the building, and sought to nullify its effect when it had been finished.

Is there not a parallel to this also to-day? The earliest brethren who, in any particular place, came out from religious systems of which Babylon is the Scriptural prototype, were occupied with getting back to God's centre of gathering, and had little need to concern themselves with wall building; because the reproach and persecution which in those days every one of them had to face was in itself a wall that kept outsiders away. In the circumstances it might be said, as had been said of the Church in its earliest days, "Of the rest durst no man join himself to them." Moreover, since most of them had to "buy" the truth (Prov. xxiii. 23) at much cost to themselves, it was not to be expected that they would "sell" it by going back to build again things which they had destroyed.

But times change. The assemblies of God's people grew in number and in size. Buildings and yet larger buildings were put up to accommodate them, until at length it has become in most places no more unpopular to be connected with the "Gospel Hall" than to be on the roll of any of the world's "churches." Children of those already in the meetings professed conversion, in very many cases through the mercy of God were really saved. These, as they were from time to time baptized and brought into the assembly, had not usually the same deep soul exercise about such matters as their parents had, who came out from some of the surrounding religious sects; nor did it cost them so much to walk in the path of obedience. An old proverb says, "Lightly come, lightly go," and it has shewn itself sadly true in this matter, as those who seek to shepherd the assemblies of God's people know only too well.

As a result of these developments and others one might name, it became very necessary to "build the wall," not so much by setting up rules such as, "You may not do this," and, "You must not go there"; and still less (though that, as we know, has often been attempted) by a wholesale cutting off from fellowship of those who do not see eye to eye with us on every point; but by emphasizing in ministry to the hearts of the saints those truths of the Word of God which bear on the separate path in which God has called His people to walk, and on the danger arising from unequal yokes of whatever kind, religious, political, or social.

It is often said, and it sounds very well, that if Christ is ministered to the saints this other "scraping" ministry, as it has been called, will be unnecessary.

Yet when we turn to the epistles of the New Testament, we find not only much of both, but also that in those epistles which were written latest, the exhortations to godliness, and to separation from evil become much more prominent; which suggests that in the apostles' days things developed much on the same lines as has been the case in our own.

Let us then look into the details which are given us in these post-captivity books, with a large measure of expectation that we shall get real help from them to meet the present need amongst the assemblies of the people of God.



## CHAPTER II

### AN OLD-TIME REVIVAL

THE story of the Jews' return from Babylonish captivity is the story of a mighty revival; and as in the case of other great revivals of more recent days, the question suggests itself, Where did the movement originate? If we inquire for instance concerning the revival which took place in Ireland in the year 1859, we are referred to the prayerful activities of four young men of Co. Antrim; or perhaps we are taken still further back to the prayers of a godly woman, who influenced these young men. Yet who can tell in what other hearts there may have been exercise; and what other prayers may have been ascending to God at this time about the same matter. Although no record of them has come down to us, we may be sure the Lord has not forgotten any such.

The fact is that all true revivals originate with God Himself; and in most cases He exercises the hearts, not of one, but of many, in order to bring about what He has purposed. Of these, it may be that very few come into prominence in the movement, as it takes shape and develops. The others are forgotten, or were never known; but the fruit of their work abides; and as for themselves, their record is on high.

Now there has perhaps never been a revival, the

sources of which we can trace more accurately and more fully, than that in the days of Joshua and Zerubabel, of Haggai and Zechariah, of Ezra and Nehemiah. Concerning it we have a history which was compiled, not merely by men, who might be mistaken or biased, but by the Spirit of God in the Word of God. There we learn that the duration of the captivity, as well as the means by which it would be terminated, not only had been planned in the counsels of God, but had been made known through the prophets, before that great calamity had even begun.

Isaiah, for instance, in chap. .xliv. 28; xlv. 1-5, announces the very name of the king of Persia who was to be God's agent in bringing about the restoration of His people, and this over a century at least previous to his birth. More than that, he actually describes Belshazzar's feast and its fearful ending, with the vividness of an eye-witness, in chap. xxi. 1-9. Note especially verses 4 and 5, "Fearfulness affrighted me; the night of my pleasure hath He turned into fear unto me. Prepare the table; watch in the watch-tower; eat, drink; arise ye princes and anoint the shield."

At a somewhat later period, Jeremiah plainly states in more than one of his prophecies that the captivity would extend for seventy years (chap. xxv. 11, 12; xxix. 10); after which the people would return again to the possession of "houses, fields, and vineyards" (chap. xxxii. 15) in their own land. In the light of these and other Scriptures, we may well say that the revival, when it did take place, was on very scriptural lines, which is more than can be said of some recent movements that have been called by this name.

As the time indicated drew nigh, God wrought great changes among the nations, with a view to bringing His purpose into effect. A period of at least comparative peace was followed by an outbreak of fresh wars and struggles, the participants in which had but little idea that God was making use of them, in order that His promises to Israel might be carried out. In Zechariah 1, we have the first of a series of great visions given to the prophet, all bearing on the return from captivity; and in it we see what influences were at work behind the scenes in those days. At verse 11 a report is presented by certain mysterious agents, whom the Lord had sent (v. 10) "to walk to and fro through the earth." They state, "We have walked to and fro through the earth; and behold all the earth sitteth still, and is at rest." This immediately stirs up intercession on the part of One who is called "The Angel of the Lord." He pleads, "O Lord of Hosts, how long wilt Thou not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, against which Thou hast had indignation these threescore and ten years." To this prayer the Lord replied, we are told, "with good words and comfortable" (v. 13); some of which the Angel, in the succeeding verses, communicates to Zechariah. "Thus saith the Lord of Hosts, I am jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with a great jealousy; and I am very sore displeased with the nations (R.V.) that are at ease." Here we have the hidden secret as to why that ease was broken in upon, and a welter of conflict and strife ensued; out of which Cyrus was raised up to perform the Lord's pleasure, "even saying to Jerusalem, Thou

shalt be built, and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid" (Isa. xlv. 28).

At this juncture, when the Lord was overthrowing nations to fulfil His will, and in pursuance thereof the kingdom of Babylon had been conquered by the Persian armies, another very different kind of activity is brought to our notice in Dan. ix. 1, 2. The Lord had stirred up the mind of His aged servant Daniel to become occupied and concerned as to the meaning and outcome of the momentous events which were taking place around him. In his perplexity he turned, as every servant of God should turn, to the Scriptures; and while reading in the prophecies of Jeremiah, he was, so to speak, brought to a standstill by that portion known to us as chap. xxix. 10, "Thus saith the Lord, that after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon, I will visit you, and perform My good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place." As he read these words Daniel's mind went backward through the long years to that time when in his boyhood he had been carried down with others to Babylon. How long ago was it? Why just about seventy years; and if so the time must surely be at hand when God would fulfil His promise, and visit His people with blessing.

In view of this precious truth which he had learned, what was Daniel to do? He was too old to take any prominent or active part in the hoped for restoration of his people; but the passage itself would answer his unspoken query, for it continues, "Then shall ye call upon Me, and ye shall go and pray unto Me, and I will

hearken unto you." Here was one thing he could do, if he could do nothing else; he could pray. And pray he did, that noteworthy prayer recorded for us in Dan. ix., with its full confession of the sin, sin against God's law (v. 5), sin in rejecting God's message through the prophets (v. 6), sin on the part of the people generally (v. 7), sin on the part of their kings and other leaders (v. 8). No less than four times in it there occurs the acknowledgment, "We have sinned" (vv. 5, 8, 11, 15).

Not only did he pray then, but he continued to pray, as the next chapter shews us; and while he did so, God made known to him many things concerning His purposes, and Israel's future, as well as concerning the hidden forces which were at work, for and against the furtherance of these purposes. See especially chap. x. 12, 13, a passage that cannot fail to remind us of the one to which attention has already been called in Zech. i. 7-16.

Doubtless the same exercise of soul which is seen in Daniel's prayers would be manifested in other activities as well; and how far he may have been responsible for the interest that was taken by Cyrus in the Jews' restoration, and perhaps even for the zeal shewn by Joshua and Zerubbabel, is known only by the Lord. What we read is that "the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia" (Ezra i. 1); and again, "The Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel . . . and the spirit of Joshua" (Hag. i. 14); and again, "Then rose up . . . all them whose spirit God had stirred" (Ezra i. 5, R.V.); but whether, or to what extent, this may have been done through the influence of Daniel, we cannot

say. The Lord knows, however, just as He knows all the hidden service of His faithful ones; and we may rest assured that among the "wise" who "turn many to righteousness," and to whom it is promised that they will "shine as the stars for ever and ever," Daniel shall "stand in his lot" at the end of the days (Dan. xii. 3, 13).

## CHAPTER III

### THE HAND OF GOD

IN our last chapter, we saw that God Himself was the prime Mover in all those events which led up to the Return from the Captivity; and the phrase that several times occurs was emphasized, "The Lord stirred up the spirit of" this one and that one, to help forward in the carrying out of His purpose.

Not only, however, did the movement originate with Him, but He was also its Guide and Support in the various trials and difficulties which from time to time arose during its development, as is clearly shewn all through the post-captivity books. This point is perhaps nowhere more simply or more beautifully stressed than by Ezra in Ezra vii and viii., the two chapters which deal with the writer's own journey from Babylon to Jerusalem, accompanied by a band of exiles, in the days of Artaxerxes. He does so by referring, some six times in this short section, to what he calls "The hand of our God upon us." It is interesting to note how varied are the connections in which he introduces this expression, for they illustrate in a marked way how carefully God watched over and protected His people at this time.

Although not the first occurrence of it, the key passage to the other five is that one in chap. viii. 22

where Ezra says, "I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen, to help us against the enemy in the way; because we had spoken unto the king saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him." It is evident here that in making his request to Artaxerxes about the matter, Ezra had emphasized the power of God to protect His own, and bring down His enemies; and therefore, as he describes the details of his journey in the two chapters, he is gladdened again and again by the remembrance that in each the testimony he had borne before the king proved to be true, and God's hand was indeed upon them for good at every stage.

Not the least interesting point is the effect which Ezra's testimony before Artaxerxes had on himself. "I was ashamed," he says, "to require a band of soldiers." Why was he ashamed to do so? Because, as he tells us, it would have spoilt the effect of the testimony to God's care he had borne before the heathen king. Oh that we, God's people of to-day, were as fearful lest we should mar the testimony of our lips for Him, by actions and ways not in keeping with it. For example, a part of our testimony is that we have been called out from the world, but do we not in many cases live as though we still belonged to it? We say that we are a heavenly people, yet how unheavenly at times are our actions!

Enoch's testimony in days of old was that God IS, and that it pays one to seek Him (Heb. xi. 6). But then he lived for three hundred years like one who believed this. Paul, having the same spirit of carefulness which Ezra had, says of himself and his fellow-labourers,



“Giving no occasion of stumbling in anything, that our ministration be not blamed” (2 Cor. vi. 3, R.V.).

A further effect which this testimony of Ezra to the king produced in himself is given us in the verses of Ezra viii. which precede and follow the one already quoted. There we see how it caused him to betake himself to God in earnest prayer, that the guidance and protection of which he had made mention to Artaxerxes might indeed be given them. That his prayer was abundantly answered, the other five references in the narrative to “the hand of God” sufficiently prove.

In this respect also let us profit by Ezra’s example, because it is no more possible for us than it was for him, to maintain testimony for God, without continually seeking His own help to do so. There is still, as then, “the enemy in the way” (v. 22); and we must confess, as did Jehoshaphat, “We have no might against this great company that cometh against us, neither know we what to do; but our eyes are upon Thee” (2 Chron. xx. 12).

As to the other occurrences of our expression, we have it first in chap. vii. 6, of Artaxerxes’ grant to Ezra. “The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him.” That was a good start, and shews how easily the Lord can influence “the powers that be” in favour of His people and His work.

Following it, Ezra tells in chap. vii. 28, that he was “strengthened by the hand of the Lord his God upon him” in his next step, which was that of gathering “chief men” of Israel to go up with him. Very needful

this was, because it was of much importance that the right type of men should go, men who would be a blessing among God's people, and not a hindrance as some chief men who are mentioned in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah proved to be.

Another, and somewhat similar connection of our phrase, is in chap. viii. 18, where he says, "By the good hand of our God upon us, they brought us a man of understanding, of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi," together with some other gifted men whom he names.

Then in chap. viii. 31, he records, with regard to the journey itself, that "the hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way." And lastly in chap. vii. 9, we have the completion of the journey chronicled by him in these words, "Upon the first day of the first month began he to go up from Babylon; and on the first day of the fifth month came he to Jerusalem, according to THE GOOD HAND OF HIS GOD UPON HIM." Those who begin with God, and go on with God, ever finish well.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ADVERSARIES

WE have seen in our previous chapters how the "Back from Babylon" movement was of God as to its origin; and how the hand of God guided and guarded His servants during its development.

Let us now look at some of the forces which opposed themselves to it, not forgetting as we do so that in this case also there were hidden powers at work to hinder, even before any outward and visible opposition took place. This is clear from passages to which reference has already been made, such as Zech. i., and more especially Dan. x. 12, 13, where we find the response to Daniel's prayer delayed for no less than twenty-one days (see vv. 2, 3) by a mighty unseen agent, who is described as "The Prince of the kingdom of Persia." The real source of all the opposition to the returned exiles is still more plainly shown in Zech. iii., where the prophet gets a vision of Joshua the High Priest "standing before the Angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to be his adversary" (v. 1 R.V.). Thus it is always, for where the Lord's work is going on in fulfilment of His purposes, the Devil will ever be found doing all that possibly can be done to hinder it.

Turning, however, to the outward opposition, the

first reference to it occurs in Ezra iv., where the "adversaries" came forward posing as friends, and offering their help. They say to Joshua and Zerubbabel, "Let us build with you, for we seek your God, even as ye do." It was a big claim to make, because the seeking of God, according to this very book of Ezra, involves at least two things. In chap. vi. 21, those endeavouring "to seek the Lord God of Israel" separated themselves from the filthiness of the heathen of the land; and in chap. vii. 10, Ezra's own "seeking" implied obedience of heart "to do and to teach" God's commandments. Do we not still need to look, more carefully than perhaps we do, for such marks in those who offer us their help, or who ask for ours?

The would-be helpers in Ezra iv. had neither of these marks, and they betrayed their true origin in the remaining part of their statement, which shews that they were descended from the settlers placed by the kings of Assyria in the cities of Samaria, after the Israelites had been taken captive therefrom. Verses 10 and 17 confirm this, as does also Neh. iv. 2. What kind the religion of these people was, and how they came to have it, is made very clear in 2 Kings xvii. 24-41, a most interesting passage, through which runs as a sort of refrain, "They feared the Lord, and served their own gods." How like to much of present-day religion this is!

In earlier days, another Joshua and his associates were ensnared by the Gibeonites under pretences somewhat similar; but the leaders of the returned captives are amongst that small and honourable band of men in the Scriptures who knew when and how to say NO,

and they said it with all emphasis, "Ye have nothing to do with us to build." So determined was their stand, that it left its impress on their people ever afterwards, with the result that, even in New Testament times, when the Jews' own worship had degenerated to mere formalism, it could still be said, "The Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans." This very fact, however, suggests a danger, which is that we may be continuing to repeat the sayings, and to imitate the actions, of men who stood for God and His Word in their generation, without having any real exercise of soul ourselves about the matters in question.

The refusal of their help at once brought the true character of these Samaritans to light. They "weakened the hands of the people . . . and troubled them in building, and hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose" (vv. 4, 5). And in the book of Nehemiah, which deals with a period considerably later, we find them still at this, under the leadership of Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem.

It is, however, doubtful if this active hostility on the part of the adversaries was the worst thing against which the exiles had to contend. Was it not still more dangerous when some of the latter, especially the wealthier of them, began to cultivate friendships with these outsiders, and ultimately, even to intermarry with them? This is, of course, one of Satan's oldest devices, often before tried by him with success, for the ensnaring of God's people. In the days before the Flood, the intermarrying of the "sons of God" with the "daughters of men" was a chief factor in furthering the wickedness which caused that calamity. In Israel's

wilderness days it was the plan which Balak, on Balaam's advice, used with much effect to bring down God's judgment on the camp (see Num. xxv. 1-4, and Rev. ii. 14). At a later period it was the pitfall into which Solomon and others of the kings fell. And now, after the severe lesson of the captivity, it is still an evil which has to be faced repeatedly; by Ezra in chap. ix. and x.; by Nehemiah in Neh. vi. 17-19, and xiii. 1-30; by Malachi in Mal. ii. 11-16.

Here surely is a danger with regard to which we very much need to-day the solemn lesson taught in these and the other passages referred to. Indeed, the New Testament itself makes use of some of the above-mentioned occurrences in that way, as in the references to Baalpeor and Balaam in 1 Cor. x. 8, 11 and Rev. ii. 14. Has there not been, among ourselves, a similar turning back into worldly associations? Has it not generally been most pronounced amongst those who have acquired a little of this world's wealth? And has it not frequently developed into marriages of the saved with the unsaved?

An interesting little point in this connection occurs in Neh. vi. 17-19, where the writer tells us that some of the Jewish nobles who were doing these things reported Tobiah's "good deeds" before him, and then told Tobiah what Nehemiah said. Is not this characteristic of such? They are ever praising those who are outsiders and telling of their good deeds; whereas they can scarcely find anything good to say about their brethren.

## CHAPTER V

### GIFTS DIFFERING

HAVING traced the work of God in the events which made possible His people's return from the Captivity, as well as in guiding and protecting them afterwards; and having on the other hand noticed some of the forms of opposition which Satan raised up against them; let us now consider another kind of encouragement that was given them—the ministry of words from God suited to their present needs through His prophets.

At a time after they had first received a set back, owing to hindrances put in their way by the adversaries, and were so daunted thereby that for a while they entirely ceased to build the Temple, we find the prophets Haggai and Zechariah coming forward as “the Lord's messengers in the Lord's message” (Hag. i. 13), with words of rebuke, and more especially words of comfort for them.

It is of interest to note in the case of these two, what indeed is true in general of the men whom God raised up at this period to be leaders amongst His people, that there is much variety in their gifts and in their service. Zerubbabel, Joshua, Ezra, Nehemiah, etc., had each his own place to fill, and

his own particular work to do. No one of them was a mere replica of any other. And similarly, if we put the words of Haggai alongside those of Zechariah, we learn that these two also had "gifts differing according to the grace . . . given" (Rom. xii. 6). Nor was it necessary or even advisable that it should be otherwise.

The messages of the one are simple and plain, those of the other profound and mystical, which is perhaps what might be expected, since the one man, Haggai, was apparently an obscure person, of whose parentage and history no record is given, while the other, Zechariah, seems to have belonged to a great priestly family, well known in those days. (Compare Zech i. 1 with Neh. xii. 1, 4, 12, 16 and contrast Hag. i. 1). Yet for all this there was no discord, and their ministry blended happily together for the help of the Lord's people.

If these latter were at all like ourselves, we may be sure that some of them said, "We like Zechariah best, he always leads us into the deep things," and that others retorted, "We much prefer Haggai, for there is no difficulty in understanding what he says." But God saw need for both, and therefore gave variety of gifts, just as He still does "for the perfecting of His saints" (Eph. iv. 12). Unity should ever be aimed at amongst God's servants, but trying to bring about uniformity is wasted effort. Paul says to the Corinthians in 1 Cor. xii., "The body is not one member but many," so let not the foot with false humility say, "Because I am not the hand I am not of the body" (vv. 14, 15). Then turning his proposition the other



way round, he says, "There are many members yet but one body, so that the eye cannot in its pride say unto the hand, "I have no need of thee" (vv. 20, 21). How much mischief these petty conceits and envies have wrought from time to time amongst God's people cannot be estimated.

The recorded messages of Haggai are five in number, and were all of them delivered in less than four months. The first is contained in chap. i. 2-11, and is a message of reproof and warning. The people had been neglectful of their responsibility for God's work, while they carefully attended to their own. His Temple was left half finished, while they proceeded to "ciel" or overlay their own houses, probably with cedar, as Jehoiachim had done with his, just before the Captivity began (Jer. xxii. 13-19).

For this they had, of course, a ready excuse. They had been "hindered," and therefore had concluded that "the time is not come, the time that the Lord's House should be built." A poor sort of deduction this, yet a similar one is often made still. Should it not rather have been, "If there were no opposition, we might well doubt whether it was the Lord's work at all"? Moreover the very king who had commanded the work to cease (Artaxerxes of Ezra iv. 7, 23, the Pseudo-Smerdis of history), had been cut off after a reign of less than a year, a fact in which the builders might surely have seen the hand of God. And they themselves, since they had discontinued the work, had been chastened by famine and by ill-success in everything they tried to do. Twice over in this first message Haggai exhorts them to

“consider” their ways, and to give the Lord’s work its rightful place, that He might “take pleasure in it” and in them.

As soon as the hearts of the people responded to this call of God, and even before the building was actually resumed, He gave Haggai a second message for them, which consisted of but one short weighty statement, “I am with you, saith the Lord” (chap. i. 11). Encouraged thus, they made a fresh start, and before the month ended in which these two messages had been received, the work was once again going forward.

As they proceeded with it, they found however that there were other things to dishearten besides the external opposition. Their work itself presented difficulties; and some old men among them, who remembered the glory of Solomon’s house, made comparisons, not too wisely perhaps, between former days and these. So God again gave Haggai a word of cheer for them in chap. ii. 1-9. In it we have a repetition of his second message with additions. He takes them back, much further than the experience of their oldest men could take them, even to the covenant He had made with their fathers, when He brought them out of Egypt; and He links this with the present by adding, “So My Spirit remaineth among you; fear ye not.” Then He takes them forward to a latter glory of the House which shall far exceed its former glory, and concludes, “In this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of Hosts.”

Two months later the people appear to have become once more discouraged, not as on the last occasion by the littleness of their work, but by their own proneness

to evil. Haggai, at this juncture, gets a fourth message (chap. ii. 10-19), and the two illustrations which are used in it, as to things holy or unclean, help to show us what the trouble must have been. They teach that uncleanness was found to spread itself more easily and widely than holiness, with the result that even the very service done for God by the people seemed to be defiled by it. And because there had not as yet, although three months had elapsed since their resumption of work at the Temple, been any clear sign of the material blessings which God had promised them, they may well have wondered if their unworthiness and uncleanness were preventing them from obtaining these. Haggai is therefore commissioned to tell them that from that very day they would begin to have experience of them.

His fifth and last message was delivered on the same date as the previous one, and was addressed to Zerubbabel the leader of the returned exiles, who doubtless needed special encouragement and comfort in view of the special responsibilities resting upon him. It contains a reversal, so far as Zerubbabel personally is concerned, of the woe pronounced on his ancestor Jechoniah in Jer. xxii. 24-30. Zerubbabel would, of course, be aware of that prophecy, and may possibly have felt cast down as he read there that none of Jechoniah's seed (to which he himself belonged, see 1 Chron. iii. 17-19 and Matt. i. 12) would prosper, and that though Jechoniah were the *signet* (v. 24) on the Lord's right hand, He would pluck him thence, and give him into the hands of the heathen. "Do not fear,"

says the Lord to him (Hag. ii. 21-23). "I will overthrow the kingdoms of the heathen, and . . . in that day will I take thee, O Zerubbabel, my servant, . . . and will make thee as a *signet*, for I have chosen thee, saith the Lord of Hosts."

## CHAPTER VI

### ANOTHER WITNESS

WE cannot dwell at length on the prophecies contained in the fourteen chapters of Zechariah, as we have done in the case of the five short messages of Haggai. Yet we may at least indicate how the dated visions, which form the first half of his book, emphasize the point to which we have already called attention; namely that, diverse in form as his ministry was from that of his simpler fellow-prophet, there was complete unity in their testimony, so far as the immediate result aimed at was concerned. It was long after their day that the words were written in 1 Cor. xiv. 3, "He that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort"; but these three words, more fitly than perhaps any other, describe the effect upon their contemporaries of the "prophesying" (Ezra vi. 14) of both these messengers of God.

In thus dealing with their messages as they applied to their own times, we do not wish to ignore or to minimize the fact that they point forward to much greater things in store for Israel in a day yet future. Is it not so, rather, on the other hand, that some students of prophecy lose much by neglecting the immediate connection in which certain Scriptures were at first delivered; and that a little attention paid to this would

render them less liable to go astray in their views as to what future application those passages may have?

It will be noticed that the first recorded prophecy of Zechariah was given him "in the eighth month, in the second year of Darius." It therefore comes in respect of time between the third and fourth messages of Haggai. All the visions which follow it, from chap. i. 7 to the end of chap. vi., appear to have been seen by the prophet in one night, the four and twentieth of the eleventh month; that is to say, exactly two months later than the delivery of the fourth and fifth messages of his fellow-prophet.

Like Haggai, Zechariah starts with a note of expostulation and warning (chap. i. 1-6). Then we have the first of the night visions, in which is shewn, as has been already pointed out, those hidden agencies that were at work for or against the restoration of God's people.

Chap. ii., with its gracious promises, is like an enlargement of the second and shortest of Haggai's messages, "I am with you, saith the Lord." Compare especially with it verse 5 here, "I, saith the Lord, will be unto her a wall of fire round about," and verse 10, "I will dwell in the midst of thee, saith the Lord."

In chap. iii., the question of their condition in God's sight is dealt with, their priestly leader, Joshua, being taken as representative of the nation; while in chap. iv. light is thrown on the subject of the maintenance of the testimony in a time of weakness, special reference being made in this connection to the work of their other great leader, Zerubbabel. The inquiry that occurs here at chap. iv. 10, "Who hath despised the day of small things," suggests at once Haggai's third

message, in which mention is made of some who disparaged the work by contrasting with it the grandeur of the house in former days (Hag. ii. 3). The encouragement which was there given, "My Spirit remaineth among you" (Hag. ii. 5), also has its counterpart here in verse 6, "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts."

In chap. v., we have two visions, in the first of which the authority of God's law is upheld, and a curse pronounced on transgressors thereof; while in the second a symbol of Babylonish "wickedness" (v. 8) is seen to be transferred from the Lord's land to the land of Shinar (Babylon) to which it properly belonged. These, as well as the reference to defiled garments in the vision of chap. iii., may be compared with Haggai's fourth message, which, like them, is concerned with defilement and uncleanness (Hag. ii. 11-14).

Finally, in the latter part of chap. vi., where this series of visions comes to an end, the prophet sees "crowns" of reward for Joshua and his fellows, which, of course, corresponds to Haggai's final message regarding the personal reward of Zerubbabel.

These visions, to which we have so briefly referred, will well repay careful study. Not only do they, on the one hand, shew us God's past dealings with the returned exiles, and, on the other, point us forward to the great future which yet lies before Israel; but they also contain a multitude of helpful and practical lessons for ourselves. Here are lessons on the loving interest that God ever takes in the welfare of His own; lessons on our justification and standing before Him; lessons on obedience and on separation from "wickedness";

lessons on service and testimony, showing more especially how fully this testimony is to be, and can be, maintained in a "day of small things"; and lastly, the encouraging and stimulating lesson that our blessed Lord is coming quickly, and His reward with Him, to give every man according as his work shall be. May we not only learn these lessons but LIVE THEM, while we wait for and look forward to a good time coming, like that so beautifully pictured in the closing words of Zechariah's ministry at chap. xiv. 20, 21. THEN there shall be no more the "Canaanite" in the House of the Lord. THEN uncleanness shall no longer prevail over holiness (as in Hag. ii. 12-14), having been completely put away (chap. xiii. 1, 2). THEN the engraving, HOLINESS TO THE LORD, shall no longer be confined to the plate on the High Priest's mitre (chap. iii. 5); but shall be alike applicable to everything connected with God's people, from the "pots" in their houses to the "bells" on their horses.

THEN, in the still grander language of the New Testament prophecy addressed to ourselves, "there shall in no wise enter into it anything that defileth, . . . but they which are written in the Lamb's Book of Life; . . . and His servants shall serve Him, and they shall see His face, and His Name shall be in their foreheads."



## CHAPTER VII

### HOW SIN WAS DEALT WITH

THUS far, in our series of lessons on times of the Return from Babylon, we have been occupied mainly with the early stages of the history; that is to say, with the origin of the movement, and with the days of its first leaders, Joshua and Zerubbabel; to which period also belongs the ministry of the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah.

But the journey of Ezra from Babylon to Jerusalem, on which we dwelt as illustrating God's care for His people, is the starting point of a later period. Between the 6th chapter of his book, where the building of the temple is completed; and the 7th, in which Ezra himself is introduced, and the decree of Artaxerxes authorizing his journey is given; more than half a century had elapsed; and changes that were not for the better had taken place in the condition of things at Jerusalem. Amongst these were the association of the returned exiles, in marriage and otherwise, with outsiders, and a consequent deterioration in every way of their testimony for God.

It was in such circumstances that God raised up two new leaders to be a help and a blessing to His people, first Ezra, and then, some thirteen years

later, Nchemiah. The story of the work of these two, and of the reforms brought about by them, occupies the last four chapters of Ezra's book, as well as the whole of that of Nehemiah; and therefore there is in a way a closer relationship between these, than between the two sections of the former book.

No sooner had Ezra got settled at Jerusalem after his four months' journey from Babylon than he is faced (chap. ix. 1, 2) with the sorrowful state of declension which existed there at that time. The people, their priests, and their Levites, were mingling with "the people of the lands," doing according to their abominations, and even intermarrying with them. The princes and rulers, who should have corrected the evil, were themselves foremost in it. Ezra therefore has to take the matter up; and the two final chapters of his book relate how he did so, and with what results. In them, as elsewhere in these post-captivity writings, we may learn much for our own help in similar times of declension.

At the very beginning of the narrative we have a list of those surrounding nations, with whom the Jews were associating, and whose abominations they were imitating. There are eight mentioned, and every one of them had been a source of trouble to Israel from their earliest days. Here are the Egyptians, from whose bondage God had delivered them at the start, and alliance with whom had been a trap and a plague to their kings in later times. Here, too, are the Moabites and Ammonites, who oftentimes in their history had similarly ensnared them, and who had rejoiced beyond

measure at their captivity (Jer. xlvi. 27; Ezek. xxv. 3, 6). And, strangest of all, here are no less than five of the seven nations that had been in possession of Canaan when they first entered it, and whom they were commanded to extirpate without mercy, because of the filthy abominations of which they had been guilty. Now, at the end of a thousand years, most of them are still existent to be thorns in the sides of God's people as in Judges ii. 3, and to be a snare to them in exactly the same way as they had been in Judges iii. 5-7.

Two lessons for us lie here on the very surface, one as to the persistence of sin, the other as to the persistence of its effects. The former is that no amount of previous experience of the evils resultant from worldly alliances, or indeed from any other form of sin, is in itself a sufficient guarantee against falling once more into the same temptation. The latter is that disobedience to the commands of God not only results in trouble at the time, but has further painful consequences which are sometimes very long lasting. In this case, as we have seen, they are still being experienced after a thousand years.

As we study the two chapters in which the mischief is dealt with, we find that those who are brought before us in them fall into four groups. First, there is Ezra himself, who stands out as the one person with spiritual power to handle the affair. "Arise, for this matter belongeth unto thee," said they to him (chap. x. 4), and they were right. To take the lead on such an occasion required very special fitness, and this fitness it is probable that Ezra alone amongst them all

possessed. It required no doubt a man with some natural ability for leadership, but it required much more than that. He had to be one who was absolutely true to God's Word, and therefore clear of the evil thing himself; one who saw its exceeding sinfulness in God's own light. Yet he must at the same time have a heart of compassion for the Lord's people, such as would cause him to treat their failure as his own, instead of taking up the attitude described in Isa. lxxv. 5, "Stand by thyself; come not near to me, for I am holier than thou." That these qualifications were indeed to be found in Ezra, is plain from his course of action in chap. ix. 3; x. 1, 6, and still more so from the tenor of his prayer in the latter part of chap. ix.

A second group is that formed of those who "trembled at the words of the God of Israel." They are mentioned in chap. ix. 4 as joining Ezra in his humiliation and prayer, and they are again referred to in chap. x. 3 as being still in association with him. They had not, perhaps, as he had, power to take the initiative in dealing with the evil, but they had evidently kept themselves clear from complicity in it, and no doubt had deeply mourned over it. How it must have encouraged Ezra to have the fellowship of such men in prayer and action.

The third group is composed of the "very great congregation" mentioned in chap. x. 1, that is to say, of the vast majority of the people of God, who proved on this occasion that their hearts and consciences were not so difficult to reach after all, when the evil of what they had done was brought home to them in a right

way, by the right type of men. They willingly submitted themselves to the guidance of Ezra and his fellows, and to the stringent reform that was found necessary.

Lastly, we have at chap. x. 15 (if, as is probable, the R.V. reading of the verse be correct) a fourth group, a small one we are glad to note, since it consisted of but four persons, which appears to have set itself against any reformation whatever. "Only Jonathan, the son of Asahel, and Jahaziah, the son of Tikvah, stood up against this matter, and Meshullam and Shabbethai, the Levite, helped them." Their opposition proved futile, however, for the work of reformation began, and was carried through.

As we trace the characteristics of these four different groups, do we not seem to have known each one of them in our own days, in connection with troubles that have had to be dealt with amongst saints? Have we not had experience at one time or another of—

(1) The man or men with spiritual power to "handle a matter wisely"? (Prov. xvi. 20). (Would that there were more of them!)

(2) Those "that sigh and that cry" (Ezek. ix. 4) on account of the evil, whatever it may be, who personally are free from it, and who will gladly support any godly effort made to end it?

(3) The many of God's people whose hearts can still be reached when right action is taken, and the truth of God brought to bear on them?

(4) The irreconcilable few who keep up opposition as long as they can possibly do so?

And since this similarity does exist, are we not right in seeking, as we have done, to learn from these records of bygone troubles lessons that may help us when faced with our own.

## CHAPTER VIII

### NEHEMIAH'S PRAYERS

SOME twelve or thirteen years had elapsed since the events touched on in our last chapter—the coming of Ezra to Jerusalem and the reformation at that time wrought by him in the matter of mixed marriages—when God suddenly raised up another helper and leader for His people in the person of Nehemiah. Whether Ezra had remained in the city during the interval is doubtful. The commission given him by the king of Persia in chap. vii. of his book rather suggests a temporary stay (see vv. 14 and 25), whilst the condition of things described in Neh. i. 3 is scarcely what one would expect to find, had he been still in power there. He does not come into view again until Neh. viii. 1, which is after the building of the city wall had been completed, and it is quite possible that he had meanwhile gone to Babylon to report to Artaxerxes, and had returned, either with Nehemiah, or shortly after.

As we think of these two men, we are once more face to face with that variety in gift to which we called attention in the case of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Like the latter, Ezra was a priest and a scholar; while Nehemiah, though possibly of high or even royal descent, was, as his writings and actions

shew, a man of a simple turn of mind, who possessed much ability of a practical kind, and had a capacity for getting work done by evoking in others the same energy and enthusiasm that was in himself.

His simplicity of character is seen in many ways, but perhaps in none more beautifully than in the short ejaculatory prayers which he uttered on all sorts of occasions, just as he felt the impulse. A number of them are recorded in his book, inserted abruptly from time to time in the narrative; and there is nothing quite like them elsewhere in the Scriptures. They give us the impression of a man who, no matter what he was engaged with at the moment, could turn and speak to God about it, as to One who was ever by his side.

The incident described in chap. ii. 1-6 shows this clearly; and though it does not contain, as other passages do, the actual words of prayer used by him; it forms a fitting introduction to those which do. The great king of Persia had asked Nehemiah a question, and in the presence of such a man hesitancy in replying would have been most unwise. Yet between the king's inquiry and his answer to it, he found time for praying to the God of heaven about the matter; with the result that he was enabled so to speak and present his case that he at once obtained from Artaxerxes what he sought.

The facility with which he, not only on this occasion, but always, could seek God's face in his need, is no doubt to a large extent the secret of Nehemiah's success in his undertakings, and of his being, with all his simple-mindedness, more than a match for the plotters and



schemers who sought his ruin and the overthrow of his work. It would therefore be very profitable to consider at length the circumstances which in each case brought forth these prayers of his, that we might learn how to act in similar difficulties ourselves. But as we may refer to some of them later, we shall at present content ourselves with indicating them briefly.

There are in all eight short prayers of this type given in his book, and they fall into two groups, those in which he is speaking to God about others, and those in which he speaks of himself and his work. Of the former there are three, which are as follows—

(1) In chap. iv. 4 he tells the Lord about the scorn of the enemies. "Hear, O our God, for we are despised," etc.

(2) In chap. vi. 14 he speaks to Him of their plottings. "My God, think Thou on Tobiah . . . and the rest . . . that would have put me in fear."

(3) In chap. xiii. 24 he reminds Him of the misbehaviour of the priests. "Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood."

Now for us, as for Nehemiah, there can be no better course, when in connection with our work for God we meet with rebuffs that dishearten us, than to talk to God Himself about them. They will shrink into littleness as we converse with Him, and we shall obtain fresh courage and strength to continue in spite of them. It is no small matter to be despised and scorned, since a sneer can at times be more cruel than a blow. And it is particularly unpleasant to experience this, just at

the time when we have been giving of our best in service to God and His people, and fancy that we have succeeded very well. Nehemiah and his fellows had wrought with earnestness and diligence, yet in chap. iv. 2, 3 these would-be architects come along with their criticism. "What do these feeble Jews, . . . if a fox go up he shall even break down their stone wall." To make the thing worse, some of the builders themselves began to speak in the same strain, "There is much rubbish, so that we are not able to build." It was all very discouraging, and many a man would have given up in despair. But Nehemiah just paused, so to speak, with the trowel in his hand, to tell God about it, and then went on quietly with his work.

The next prayer, that in chap. vi. 14, was the outcome of something even more devilish than the sneers, a deliberate plotting against Nehemiah personally, in connection with which some inside the walls conspired with those outside. His resource here again was his usual one of crying to God about the matter, for like the cat in the fable which had but one trick where the fox had ten, this was his only safeguard, and it made him, simple as he was, superior to all the craftiness of his enemies.

In the last prayer of the three, the trouble which he brings before God is of another kind, the unscriptural and worldly behaviour of those on whom he should have been able most of all to rely, the priests. Was it not an even deeper trial to him than the sneers of chap. iv., and the plots of chap. vi., to find that the very high priest's family had become connected in marriage with that of Sanballat, the leader

of their enemies? Small wonder that Nehemiah in his direct and simple way says, "I chased him from me."

It is sad but true that much evil of a similar sort to this is to be found amongst God's people to-day. There are those whose families seem to have been brought up and educated as though for the very purpose of being allied with the Sanballats and Tobiahs of our time. Sometimes when the mischief has been done, and it is past recall, the parents appear to be shocked and grieved; yet it might well occur to them that they are simply reaping what they have sown. In other cases there is not even this tardy acknowledgement of the wrong, but rather pride in that which has been accomplished. What an honour forsooth that one of our children is son-in-law to the great Sanballat, general of the Samaritan army, and that our daughter has his chief lieutenant, Tobiah, for her father-in-law.

This was the kind of thing which confronted Nehemiah, and it confronts us still. Can anything be more painful than to find that those we counted on as helpers, yea even leaders in the work, have sunk so low that their chief aim is to link themselves with the world in every way possible? Would it not cause us at times to wonder on whom can we rely? Well for us if, in such circumstances, we know how to make use of Nehemiah's resource, and tell God about it. Tell Him of the failure and the sin. Tell Him of its weakening effect upon ourselves. Talk to Him till our souls become occupied with Him, and we realize that, whoever else may fail us, He never will. So shall we be strengthened as Nehemiah was to go onward in our

path of testimony for Him, even though we should find none else to go with us. As Paul said, "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved his present world, . . . notwithstanding, the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me" (2 Tim. iv. 10, 17).

## CHAPTER IX

### MORE OF NEHEMIAH'S PRAYERS

So far, we have considered those of Nehemiah's short prayers, in which he speaks to God about other people. We shall now turn to the remaining ones, five in number, which are directly occupied with himself and his doings. In them he brings before the Lord—

- (1) At chap. v. 19, his care for God's people.
- (2) At chap. xiii. 14, his care for God's House.
- (3) At chap. xiii. 22, his care for the Sabbath.
- (4) At chap. xiii. 31, his care for God's service.
- (5) At chap. vi. 9, his own need of Divine strengthening.

As we read these passages, we notice that Nehemiah was not above speaking of his own good deeds. But while some of us would perhaps tell our brethren about them, and seek their commendation, he did a wiser thing, he told God. He never seems to have looked for much from his brethren, although he willingly spent himself on their behalf; and in this matter he is well worthy of our imitation. When next you feel that you deserve to be patted on the back for something you have done, do not go to your brethren at all. They might perhaps give you a good setting down instead of the praise you look for; or on the other hand, they

might be led to imagine you a far greater person than you really are. Instead of this, just tell the Lord Himself how well you have been doing on His behalf. By this course you will at least do no harm, either to yourself or to others; and if you come back from telling Him with soberer thoughts of yourself and your works, you will have been brought down to that point far more gently than your brethren would have done it.

But what were these good deeds of his, concerning which Nehemiah prayed to God? Have you and I got any like them?

First, there was his care for God's people, and his words concerning this in chap. v. 8-18 show that his service among them was "not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind" (1 Pet. v. 2). With him it was give all and ask nothing, not even when it was justly his due. Is this so with us? Could we tell the Lord of energy and money spent by us in helping the saints? Nehemiah mentions how he assisted his brethren when they were in distress. Do we, or do we merely stand on the other side of the way and read them a lecture on the folly that brought them into such circumstances?

We have also a reference in the passage to his hospitality (vv. 17, 18). I do not suppose that in this respect any of us will be able to compete with Nehemiah in numbers and quantities as here given; but God's rule is, "According to that a man hath," and we cannot ignore the fact that hospitality is much enjoined on us in the New Testament Scriptures; so that we may well ask ourselves, what do we know of it? Are strangers from a distance allowed to come and go, in the assembly to which we belong, without anything more than a

formal announcement, or at best a formal shake of the hand? In many of the smaller meetings, and especially in what we may call the country meetings, such is certainly not the case; but there are others which have much to learn in this matter.

Coming next to chap. xiii. 14, we have there Nehemiah's word with God about his care for the temple. Someone in chap. vi. had endeavoured to get him to desecrate it, by using it for his own purposes; but Nehemiah had too much regard for the place, and too low thoughts of self, to be caught in that snare. Now it had been desecrated by others in his absence, and they had even brought Tobiah the Ammonite into it. So he made it his business to cleanse it, casting out Tobiah and his "stuff," just as Christ Himself long after, in His zeal for His Father's House, cast out the money-changers and their property.

Have we to-day any experience of the feelings which actuated our blessed Lord, and His servant Nehemiah, about this? Are we deeply conscious of the reverence which is due to God's presence as manifested in our assemblies, and does anything that savours in the least degree of irreverence fill our souls with horror? It is the very same epistle which declares that we have "boldness to enter into the Holiest," that gives to us a little further on, this warning, "Let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear; for our God is a consuming fire."

In chap. xiii. 22, Nehemiah who, as we have seen, cared for God's people, and had a zeal for God's House, shews himself to be also interested about God's time, the Sabbath. These last two are closely linked

together in various Scriptures, as Lev. xxvi. 2, "Ye shall keep My Sabbaths, and reverence My Sanctuary." Nehemiah, along with his other reforms, saw to it that God's time was given to Him; and in doing so he had no easy task, for every device which could be tried was made use of, in order to get a little worldly business done on the Sabbath. They brought in fish for sale, thinking perhaps that such a perishable article of food would be admitted to market. And with the fish they sought to introduce other wares. When he refused the merchants entrance to the city, they tried to carry on outside its gates. But Nehemiah did his work thoroughly and their trade had to cease.

Now what have you and I to tell the Lord in this connection? How much time does He get from us? A little on the Lord's Day morning, and possibly in the evening as well, but what of the remainder? Do we realize that God should have the first place in the distribution of our time, just as in the expending of our money; and that this is as true of the Christian with a big business to look after, or with long hours to work, as it is of those who are free from these? If so, let us honestly consider what can we say to God regarding our zeal in using His time for Himself; because we cannot begin to set others right as Nehemiah did, until we are sure that we ourselves are free from blame in this respect.

The prayer in chap. xiii. 31 comes after a reference to his care for the separation and purity of God's people, especially with regard to their service for Him; and here too we have much to learn from Nehemiah. Real separation from the world is not as characteristic of the



saints of God as it used to be, and the evil results of this are to be seen in many ways, especially, as we have already pointed out, in their families. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that if we fraternize with the world we shall bring up our children for the world, and if we bring up our children for the world we are bringing them up for hell. Note carefully what is said in verse 24 of this chapter, "Their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language." In what language do our children speak? Is it in the language of the meetings, or in that of the cinema?

But if association with the ungodly ruins the families of the saints, it also, as Nehemiah found, hinders their service for God. The tithes, the first-fruits, the wood offering, the work of the Levites, all had fallen into neglect, and with all these matters he had to deal. It was only to be expected that those whose chief concern was to make friends "of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab," would have little interest in such a humble affair as the "wood offering." But nothing that pertained to God's service was too small to interest Nehemiah, and the failure of others made his burden the heavier, as he sought to put things right.

It was well therefore that, conscious of his own weakness, he could cry to God for strength, as he does in our last example, that of chap. vi. 9. Surrounded by unscrupulous enemies and traitorous friends, his sole resource was in God, and such close touch with Him did he ever maintain, that he could at any moment consult Him, and seek His help.

We learn from Deut. iv. 6-8 that the greatness of

Israel consisted in two things, and one of these was that they had the Lord nigh unto them in all things that they called upon Him for. Of this access Nehemiah in large measure availed himself, and the same glorious privilege is ours to-day in even greater degree. Let us then see that we maintain a condition of soul in which we can make full use of it.

## CHAPTER X

### BUILDING THE WALL

HAVING seen how Nehemiah prayed, let us now turn to consider how he wrought; for praying and working are bound together in the Scriptures, just as praying and watching are. When the disciples get the word from their Master, "Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest that He will send forth labourers," the next thing we hear of them is that they are being sent forth themselves. And thus it is still; if our prayers for God's work are prompted by real soul exercise, this will assuredly manifest itself also by our doing all that we personally can in furtherance of that work.

Nehemiah had come to Jerusalem with a definite aim, the rebuilding of the city wall, which was lying in ruins, ever since it had been destroyed by order of Nebuchadnezzar a century and a half before. That it should be built again had been prophesied, both by Jeremiah and by Daniel; and that Nehemiah's doing of it at this juncture was in accordance with the will of God is made plain by chap. ii. 12, where it is said that God had put it in his heart, as well as by chap. vi. 16, where even to the adversaries it had become evident "that this work was wrought of our God."

Strong in his assurance that God was guiding in the matter, he laid his project before his brethren, and straightway met with the encouraging response, "Let us rise and build." Prompt action followed, and in chap. iii. we have a list of the builders, with some interesting records of the zeal and usefulness of various individuals and families amongst them. These may remind us that each little bit of service done for Him is noted by the eye of God. As we read them, our thoughts go back to other records of a similar kind, such as those in Deborah's song of Judges v., where some "jeoparded their lives unto the death" while others did nothing, and those occurring in the list of David's mighty men, in which each act of valour is so described that we seem to see the very motive which prompted it. Something like this we have also in the New Testament at Rom. xvi., where the apostle recalls services rendered in the work of the Lord by certain brethren and sisters otherwise unknown to us. One had been "a succourer of many," another had "bestowed much labour on us," yet another had shown himself "approved in Christ," and so on.

Do not all such passages seem like foreshadowings of the day when our own records will be laid open before the judgment seat of Christ, "that every one may receive . . . according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad." Then will it be perhaps that—

"Deeds of merit, as we thought them,  
He will show us were but sin:  
Little acts we had forgotten  
He will tell us were for Him."

As we consider more closely these records in Neh. iii., we cannot fail to be struck by the fact that every one, with the sole exception of the Tekoite nobles of verse 5, seemed willing to do something to further the work. Doubtless some were more fitted for it than others, and able to undertake larger sections of the wall; but that is as God would have it, for His rule is "Every man according to his several ability" (Matt. xxv. 15). Some too, finding themselves more than equal to the portion on which they had started, were willing to build "another piece." Thus did Meremoth the son of Urijah (vv. 4 and 21), and thus did the Tekoites (vv. 5 and 27) and others.

Another thing very noticeable is that the builders are drawn from all classes. Priests (vv. 1, 22, 28), Levites (v. 17), and rulers (vv. 9, 12, etc.), did not think it beneath their dignity to take part in the work. Goldsmiths (vv. 8, 32) exchanged their goldbeater's hammer for that of the mason; and apothecaries (v. 8) left the mixing of ointments to mix mortar. Even the women did all that they could to assist (v. 12).

Such zeal as is here displayed ought surely to put to shame those amongst the Lord's people to-day who are too proud to stoop to service that is lowly, as well as the drones who do no services for the Lord at all. "It is not my work," they cry, when a need is brought under their notice; but what IS their work it would be difficult to tell, unless it be the criticizing of others who do give help as best they can.

There is in our chapter an oft-repeated phrase, that might well provide a clue for anyone who really wishes to know what his work is, with a view to doing it. It is

the expression "over against his house," which occurs in verses 10, 23, 28, etc., and which seems to suggest that the work lying nearest us is, in most cases, the very work the Lord would have us to engage in. Have we not known some who told us that they felt the call of God to missionary service in a distant land, but who had never shewn either zeal or ability in the work of God in their own town, or even in their own home. Can it be expected that such persons will be any less a burden to fellow-labourers in far-off fields, than they are to fellow-saints in their own neighbourhood?

Turning once more to our records, we remark that one builder gets the unique distinction of having the word "earnestly" applied to his labour. "Baruch the son of Zabbai **EARNESTLY** repaired" (v. 20). There was, we may be sure, something out of the ordinary about the diligence which caused such an expression to be used in his case only. It reminds us once again of Rom. xvi., where, having referred in verse 12 to two sisters who "laboured in the Lord," the apostle adds a third name, with the designation, "who laboured **MUCH** in the Lord." With like exactness will our zeal for God be weighed in the Coming Day.

In another part of the list there is an omission, quite as remarkable in its way as is the word inserted in the case of Baruch. Of the gates which are mentioned in the chapter, the repair of six is described, and in five cases this is done in practically the same words. "They laid the beams thereof, set up the doors thereof, the locks thereof, and the bars thereof" (vv. 3, 6, 13, 14, 15). But in connection with the first one (v. 1), which was

built by Eliashib the high priest, no reference whatever is made to "locks" and "bars" This to some may seem a trivial point, but when we read in chap. xiii. that Eliashib was "allied to Tobiah," and had prepared a chamber for him in the very temple, we cannot but feel doubtful whether he was as anxious about having the "locks" and "bars" of the sheep-gate secure as he should have been. These suspicions may perhaps be strengthened when we note that the piece of wall "over against" Eliashib's house was not built up by himself as in other cases, but by Baruch, the "earnest" worker, and by Meremoth who took it on as additional to what he had done in verse 4. Anyhow, it is clear that Eliashib found means to introduce his friend, Tobiah, even after the wall was finished.

Yet another point of interest is that while, as already noted, each man who lived near to the wall repaired "over against his house," in the case of Meshullum, the son of Berechiah, the phrase is varied to "over against his chamber" (v. 30). That also may appear to some a trifling distinction, although we have known it to be made the basis of an exhortation on "prayerful service," and it occurred to us at the time that it might, with as good reason, have been used for a warning against "slothful service." Here again, however, we may be led to a reflection less far-fetched, and quite as practical, when we discover in chap .vi. 18 that the daughter of this man married Tobiah's son. Might it not suggest that Meshullam, who personally may have been a good man, since he is seen building another piece at verse 4, had so little control of his house and family that only the "chamber" in which he slept

could strictly be called "his"? If so, he is not alone in that respect, for this was the very evil that brought ruin on the house of Eli, and it is to be feared that we have many Elis and Meshullams amongst us still.



## CHAPTER XI

### TALKERS, TRAITORS AND PLOTTERS

SINCE the enterprise upon which Nehemiah had embarked was of God, as is shown in our last chapter, it might well have been hoped that his voyage would be a smooth and uneventful one; but such was not to be the case. Although, as we have seen, he got together a willing crew of helpers, he had adverse winds in plenty, and even, as we shall learn, met with wreckers who sought to lure him from his course by displaying false lights.

In chap. iii. we found the record of the Workers, but as we pass on to the succeeding chapters we read of others whose record is of a very different kind. We might classify them as the Talkers of chap. iv., the Traitors of chap. v., and the Plotters of chap. vi. The activities of each of these we shall now consider in order.

Turning to the fourth chapter in search of the Talkers, we have no difficulty in finding them. Here are some—

Vv. 1, 2, "Sanballat . . . spake and said";

V. 3, "Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said";

V. 10, "And Judah said";

V. 11, "And our adversaries said";

V. 12, "And . . . the Jews which dwelt by them said . . . ten times."

They had much to say, and all of it hurtful, for as we have already pointed out, scorn and despite are hard to bear. But perhaps the two worst features of the talking were that some of the builders themselves joined in (v. 10), doubtless to the detriment of their work; and that a class described as "Jews which dwelt by" the adversaries (v. 12) were most persistent of all in seeking to weaken the hands of their brethren. "You must return to us" was the ten times repeated cry of the latter (see A.V. margin, and R.V.); and as we read it we seem to remember having heard something very similar in our own experience from professing Christians who had neither the courage nor the heart to put "three days' journey" (Exod. v., 3) between themselves and the world. Such folk have no sympathy with wall-building, since it accentuates the wrongness of their own position; and the advice which they gave in Nehemiah's time, and give still, is only what might be expected from men in close association with the enemies of God and of His people.

Their "Return to us" has, however, but little weight with such as, like Jeremiah, have "eaten" the words of the Lord, and have heard Him say, "Take forth the precious from the vile; . . . let them return unto thee, but return not thou unto them" (Jer. xv. 16-19). Promotion of unity amongst God's people is a noble aim, but a union brought about at the expense of faithfulness to God would not be unity at all.

## TALKERS, TRAITORS AND PLOTTERS 65

The sneers and threats of these talkers did not after all stop the building, for as Nehemiah expressively says, "The people had a mind to work" (v. 6). Rather were the builders put on their guard by them, with the result that they carried their weapons while they builded, and maintained a constant watch. Jude, the writer of one of the "last days" epistles, appears to have had this in mind, when in that marvellous single chapter of his, in which he warns us of "mockers" (v. 18) who "speak evil (vv. 8, 10) . . . hard speeches (v. 15) . . . great swelling words (v. 16)" he combines the two exhortations, "Earnestly contend for the Faith" (v. 3); and, "Build up yourselves on your most holy Faith" (v. 20).

Passing now to the Traitors, as we have called them, of the fifth chapter, we find that they were the means of stirring up an internal trouble, more serious still than that caused by the talkers of the previous one, which was mainly from without. These were men who for their own selfish gain preyed upon their brethren engaged in the work, bringing them into debt and bondage.

In this chapter most of the talking is done by Nehemiah himself, and his indictment of the usurers and grabbers is a scathing one indeed, one to which (v. 8) they found "nothing to answer." "Ought ye not," said he, "to walk in the fear of our God, because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies." It is pleasing to note that his speech was not without effect; for they consented to disgorge a little of their illgotten gains, and to discontinue their practices.

It will be noted that foremost in this trespass were

certain well-to-do members of the community, who here and elsewhere are called "nobles." We have no less than nine references to them by that name in Nehemiah, most of which are little to their credit.

In chap. iii. 5, some of them "put not their necks to the work of their Lord."

In chap. v. 7, some of them, as we have seen, oppressed their brethren.

In chap. vi. 17, some of them "sent many letters unto Tobiah, and the letters of Tobiah came unto them."

In chap. xiii. 17, some of them were leaders in the profanation of the Sabbath.

We can well afford to be without "nobles" of this type, so very far different in character and ways from the "more noble" Berean Bible searchers of Acts xvii. 11, who had a "readiness of mind" to test everything by the Scriptures, and to obey whatsoever they found written therein. Of such nobleness we can never have too much.

The third group of hinderers, the Plotters, of chap. vi., are shown as turning their attention to Nehemiah personally, and seeking to lure him from the right path, that they might so compass his ruin. In this respect he shares the common lot of all who are at any time prominent in the service of God. As Benhadad instructed his captains at Ramoth to direct all their attention to bringing down the King of Israel, so leaders are especially aimed at by Satan; and sad to say he often succeeds better than he did in the case of Nehemiah.

In view of this, the sixth chapter might well be

entitled "The Temptation of Nehemiah," and like the temptation of our Lord in Matt. iv., that of Nehemiah was threefold, as well as being to a certain extent similar in character. Christ was tempted (1) to take His care out of His Father's hand by making bread for Himself; (2) to take a short and presumptuous way to vindicate His Messiahship; and (3) to bow to the authority and power of Satan. So Nehemiah was tempted (1) to vindicate himself against lying stories (vv. 1-9); (2) to take measures for his own protection through fear, measures which would have meant taking his care out of God's hands, and acting presumptuously (vv. 10-14); and (3) to acknowledge the "good deeds" and power of Tobiah (vv. 17-19).

Another point of interest is that, just as Christ's temptation came after the declaration, "This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased" (Matt. iii. 17), and Job's after God had said, "There is none like Him in the earth" (Job i. 8), so that of Nehemiah follows the statement of chap. v. 14-19, which shows how honourable, disinterested, and generous he was. Reading those verses one would say, surely Nehemiah's character needed no vindication, and such a man required no trickery, either to ensure his safety, or to gain popularity.

These same temptations to fear, to self-vindication, and to the seeking of popular favour, though they failed in Nehemiah's case, are still amongst the most effectual weapons that Satan possesses, and many of God's people have succumbed to them. Four messages and an open letter! Who would not, in face of such proof of the evil stories afloat, come down to the plain of

Ono to clear matters up? Nehemiah did not, but, so to speak, replied "Oh no," and continued his "great work." Next some prophets and even a prophetess took a hand in the game. Why lose your life, Nehemiah, said they, when you may save it by hiding in the Temple? But his reply was as decisive as before, "I will not go in."

His very simplicity, combined with low thoughts of self (see v. 11) and reverent thoughts of God (see ch. v. 11); and above all, the ease with which he could turn to the Lord for help (vv. 9, 14, etc.); rendered him a difficult man to tempt, and made him more than a match for all their plotting.

## CHAPTER XII

### A GREAT BIBLE READING

As has been stated previously, no reference to Ezra is found in the book of Nehemiah until we reach the eighth chapter, so that, if he was absent from the city for a time, he may have only just returned when the events narrated in that chapter took place. The absence of reference to him is not, however, conclusive proof of this; nor, on the other hand, does it suggest that Ezra, if present at the time in Jerusalem, was out of sympathy with the restoration of the wall. In the latter case the implication is rather one which has already been mentioned, namely that in the two men, Ezra and Nehemiah, we have an example of "gifts differing" (Rom. xii. 6). When the wall is to be built, Nehemiah, the practical man of business, is very properly leader in the work; but when in chap. viii. the Scriptures are to be read and expounded to the people, Ezra, the "ready scribe," who had long before "prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments" (Ezra vii. 10), comes to the front to perform the service for which he is so well equipped. The great Master Workman lays down one tool and takes up another as seems good to Him, for each has its own use.

There is, in every way, something very striking about this great gathering of the people of God in chap. viii. to hear His Word. One cannot but be impressed by the spontaneity of their assembling, by their patient reverence while the Scriptures were being read, and by the obedience thereto which was produced in them afterwards.

Some ninety years before this, soon after the arrival in their own land of the first who returned from exile, they had, at the beginning of the seventh month, "gathered themselves together as one man" to Jerusalem, that they might set up the altar of burnt offerings, and thus publicly acknowledge and worship their God (Ezra iii. 1-6). In that same month too they had kept the feast of Tabernacles (v. 4). Now in Nehemiah viii., after so long an interval, the very same expression is used of them once again, and strange to say it occurs in a similar setting, just after a list of names of the returned exiles. This had been given first in Ezra ii., but is repeated with slight variations in Nehemiah vii., as copied from a register found by Nehemiah. At its end we once more meet with the words, "The people gathered themselves together as one man," but this time it is to have read to them the Book of the Law. Here too, as in the former instance, there follows a record of how they kept the feast of Tabernacles; and on this occasion they do so in a manner in which it had never been kept "since the days of Joshua the son of Nun," but which was, nevertheless, in exact accordance with what their Bible study had taught them.

The public reading of the Scriptures should have been



a regular institution in Israel according to Deut. xxxi. 9-13, but such does not seem to have been the case. It had there been commanded that the Book of the law should be read every seventh year at the feast of Tabernacles; but from 2 Chron. xxxvi. 21 it is clear that these seventh year sabbaths had not been observed, and the period of seventy years' captivity is said to be until "the land had enjoyed her sabbaths." Seventy multiplied by seven takes us back four hundred and ninety years, to the beginning of the reign of Saul, their first king, and it is possible that any earlier failures in this matter were looked on as having already been dealt with in those periods of bondage which were so frequent in the days of the Judges.

Anyhow, if the seventh year sabbaths were not kept, it is fairly certain that the ordinance for reading the law every seventh year would be neglected also. We do, however, hear of two great Bible readings in earlier times, one in the third year of Jehoshaphat, when certain Levites were sent throughout the cities of Judah to teach, with "The Book of the law of the Lord" in their hands (2 Chron. xvii. 9), and the other in the eighteenth year of Josiah, when all the people were brought together at Jerusalem in order that the lost and found again Book might be read in their hearing (2 Kings xxiii. 2). On both those occasions there ensued a measure of reformation and of turning back to God.

In our present narrative, the public reading of the Book on the first of the seventh month gave the people such a taste for it that in chap. ix. 3 and in chap. xiii. 1 we find them at it again. And as they read they

“found written” (chap. viii. 14 and chap. xiii. 1) various commands of God which in the past had been utterly neglected, but which they now sought to obey.

It would be impossible, within our limits, to dwell upon all the interesting points connected with this great Bible reading, so we shall do no more than name some of them. Note that—

(1) It was not forced upon the people, but they themselves asked for it (v. 1).

(2) The reading continued for many hours (v. 2).

(3) Yet “the ears of all the people were attentive” (v. 3).

(4) They “stood up” in reverence while it took place (v. 5).

(5) They worshipped God for having given them such a privilege (v. 6).

(6) The reading was done “distinctly,” and the meaning was plainly set forth (v. 8).

(7) It produced mourning for past failures (v. 9).

(8) It produced joy “because they had understood the words” (vv. 10-12).

(9) There were “portions” to share with others who had not been able to be present (v. 10).

(10) Fresh truths were learnt and obeyed (vv. 14-16).

Surely in every one of these points there is something that might well have a message to us. Have we such

interest in the public reading of the Scriptures as we should have; or does the clever and perhaps witty address of the preacher appeal to us much more strongly than his preliminary reading from God's Book; so that indeed the latter is merely borne with as providing for him the necessary starting place? Are our ears always "attentive" while the reading takes place, and is our attitude one of reverence? On the other hand, do those of us who take part in meetings, whether in reading, or preaching, or praying, or even in the giving out of a hymn, take care that we do so "distinctly," that it may be to the profit of all? And lastly, is there the fruit of obedience to be found in our lives from the very frequent privileges which many of us have, of listening to the ministry of the Word of God?

With regard to the fresh truth which was recovered (vv. 14-16) on this occasion, it is well to be clear what it actually was. It was not the mere fact that the feast of Tabernacles should be observed, since there are various references to this having been done throughout Israel's history; but it was that during the feast the people should leave their houses and dwell in "booths," temporarily constructed from branches of trees; thus commemorating the fact that their fathers dwelt in such temporary structures when God brought them forth out of Egypt. To us, as we read the instructions given in Lev. xxiii. 39-43, this would seem to be one of the most characteristic and essential features of the occasion, and we feel wonder that it should have been neglected by great men of the past, such as Samuel, David, etc. Yet we have to remember that in this

respect the history of the Church of God has been very similar; and truths which are known and enjoyed and practised by simple Christians to-day, were unknown to, or ignored by even great and godly men of reformation and revival times in the past.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE MAN WHO BOWED NOT

OF the Old Testament books which set before us the state of things amongst the Israelites in post-exilic times, there remain two which we have not yet considered, Esther and Malachi. These we shall now look at in a brief way, though not because of any lack of material in them, for they merit much more attention than we can in the compass of this little book give to them.

In Esther we have the record of an episode in the history of those Jews who stayed behind when the Return from Captivity took place, an episode which shows, on the one hand how distant was their relationship with God, and on the other how carefully, in spite of their failure, God watched over their interests. He brings about the total collapse of the carefully laid plans of Haman for their destruction, yet at the same time He keeps Himself so hidden from them that not once does His Name appear in the narrative, nor is there in it a single reference to prayer on their part for deliverance, or to praise from them when it took place. Doubtless such prayer there may have been in connection with the mourning of chap. iv. 1, 16, and such praise in connection with the rejoicing of chap. ix. 18, 19; but God does not acknowledge either, from a

people who were satisfied to remain in Babylonish conditions.

The main interest of the story centres of course in the two individuals who are prominent in it, Esther and Mordecai, but more particularly in the latter. It was through his persistence in refusing to bow to Haman that the Agagite's enmity against Israel burst forth into a flame which would have devoured the entire nation, and it was his influence with Esther that constrained her to appeal to Ahasuerus, thus bringing about the defeat of the malicious plot.

Let us see then if we can discover what motive was behind this refusal of Mordecai to bow, which produced such far-reaching effects. That it was connected with his position as a Jew is evident, not only from the fact of its arousing Haman's anger against the whole race, but also from Mordecai's own explanation, given to the servants who in chap. iii. 3 asked him why he transgressed the king's command. According to the next verse his reply was that he was a Jew, as if this appeared to him to be sufficient reason.

Our inquiry then takes this form, why should not a Jew bow to an Agagite? The answer sometimes given is that bowing savoured too much of idolatry, but this is not a very satisfactory reason, since many good men of Jewish nationality are mentioned in the Scriptures as having bowed to others, without the least hint being given that what they were doing was wrong. Even Abraham their ancestor bowed himself in the presence of the children of Heth, while his grandson Jacob bowed to the ground no less than seven times before Esau. Moreover, it is scarcely conceivable that Ahasuerus

required more respect to be paid to Haman than he himself was accustomed to receive; yet neither Mordecai nor Ezra, nor any other faithful man of those times, appears to have got into difficulty through omitting to honour the Babylonian or Persian monarchs in the manner that was usual. Must we not then seek some cause lying deeper than this for the refusal of Mordecai to bow to Haman?

In chap. ii. 5, where he is first mentioned, we learn that Mordecai was a Benjamite, and the names of three of his ancestors are given, which is somewhat unusual, and must have a purpose. Of those three names, two, Kish and Shimei, are elsewhere best known as borne by members of the family to which King Saul belonged, the one by Saul's own father, and the other by that relative of his who reviled David in the day of his distress. Now in Bible times, just as is the case to-day, there appears to have been an inclination to repeat particular names in succeeding generations of the same family, and the occurrence of these two in Mordecai's genealogy may suggest that, as well as being of the tribe to which Saul belonged, he came of Saul's own family.

Turning now to the Jews' great enemy, all that we are informed as to his connections is summed up in the expression "the Agagite." Elsewhere in Scripture we do not read of Agagites; but as "Israelites" means descendants of Israel, "Canaanites" descendants of Canaan, and so on, we may take it that "Agagite" in all probability means a descendant of Agag. If so, we are by this word again led back to the days of Saul, since Agag was the name of the Amalekite

king, spared by him, but destroyed by Samuel. The only other occurrence of the word is in Num. xxiv. 7, and when this is compared with verse 20 of the same chapter, and with its use in 1 Sam. xv., we are led to the conclusion that it was either a title or a family name belonging to the rulers of the Amalekite nation. Thus, while Mordecai seems to be linked with Saul, Haman, it appears, was linked with the man whom Saul spared in disobedience to God's command. This view of the matter was commonly accepted among the Jews themselves, as may be seen in the pages of Josephus, who does not hesitate to call Haman an Amalekite.

Now have we not here what will sufficiently account for the behaviour of Mordecai? Jeremiah's message to the earliest exiles was that they should "seek the peace of the city" whereunto they had been carried captive (Jer. xxix. 7), and in pursuance of this course Mordecai had given information about the plot of the two chamberlains (Esther ii. 21-23). But when it came to be a question of whether he would obey the command of Ahasuerus to bow to an Amalekite, or obey God's own command that there was to be "war with Amalek from generation to generation" (Exod. xvii. 16), Mordecai shewed none of that weakness which his relative, Saul, had shewn in dealing with Haman's relative, Agag; "MORDECAI BOWED NOT."

Haman, on the other hand, shewed once more the same bitter hatred which had actuated those ancestors of his who "smote the hindmost" of Israel during the wilderness march. For, after all, were not the Jews who preferred to remain behind in Babylon the "hindmost" of God's people?



Indeed the very fact that it was amongst these the affair occurred, renders Mordecai's firmness all the more remarkable. That a man in Shushan, his capital, should refuse to obey the command of the Great King was surely the height of folly and presumption. A man of no account too, one of a captive race. Small wonder was it that the king's servants whispered together, and that they questioned him about it. Moreover his reply, which suggested that he acted as he did for conscience's sake, only made the matter worse. Does this Mordecai wish to make out that he is better than every one else? Look at the other Jews, bowing and scraping as low as anybody. No bigotry about them; no clinging to old shibboleths, and commands given a thousand years ago, which are quite unsuited to modern conditions. Has the foolish man never heard that proverb of the ancients, "When one lives in Babylon, one must do as Babylon does." Yet "MORDECAI BOWED NOT."

As for his fellow Jews themselves, it requires no great stretch of imagination to suggest what they would say to him. "You are merely straining at a gnat, Mordecai. Those passages in Exodus and Numbers, to which you refer us, say nothing about refusing to salute an Amalekite, but only that there is to be war with his nation. Think too what the consequences of the stand you are taking may be for all of us. It may bring about our ruin, and in any case through your bigoted sectarian attitude you will cut off the ear of the heathen, so that they will not listen to our testimony about the true God." But "MORDECAI BOWED NOT."

Many a time since then have these and similar arguments been used against those who have stood for

God's truth, and sought to maintain a conscience void of offence. Yea, perhaps we have used them ourselves, if not with our lips to others, at least in our hearts, when we have sought to find excuses for bowing, because taking a firm stand would have involved our being looked on as peculiar and bigoted, and would have hindered our business, or injured our social position.

But let us note the actual outcome of the stand which this man took. On occasions when we ourselves have bowed, we have not always gained that for which we did it. Those whose good opinion we sought, or whose scorn we feared, did not love us any the more for our bowing. They merely despised us, as we deserved. Very differently did it turn out in Mordecai's case. The man who sought not honour, and who feared not shame, received honour in abundance when God's own time came. The man whose extreme views brought trouble on his people became "accepted of the multitude of his brethren" (Esth. x. 3). The man who "BOWED NOT" was bowed to and acknowledged by all.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE MESSAGE OF MALACHI

IN order to complete our survey of the period subsequent to the Captivity, we must now turn to the book of Malachi. There we find a sad description of the evils existing in his days, and may read the solemn words of warning which God, in such circumstances, commissioned him to deliver to the people. That a movement which began amidst earnestness and zeal, and which was characterized by scrupulous adherence on the part of its leaders to what "they found written," should develop into the condition of apathy and indifference to God's claims depicted by Malachi, may seem at first sight strange; yet it is but one out of many illustrations contained in the Scriptures of man's failure to maintain any testimony wherewith God has at any time entrusted him. Not only so, but if we compare the similar "out of Babylon" movement which began amongst God's people a century ago, and consider what developments there have been, and what tendencies are at present existent in connection with it; we may well fear lest another sad example of the same kind is about to be given us.

It is generally assumed by commentators that the condition of things described in Malachi is the same which is before us in the concluding chapter of the book

of Nehemiah, and that his message was given to aid Nehemiah in the reforms at that time effected by him. It may be so, but several considerations would suggest that Malachi's prophecy comes in slightly later than this, and that in the meantime there had been an increase of the same evils which that chapter describes. Thus the plea made use of in Mal. i. 8, "Offer it now unto thy governor, will he be pleased with thee?" could scarcely refer to Nehemiah, who, during his governorship never sought anything of this kind (see Neh. v. 14, 15). And the picture presented in Mal. iii. 16 of a remnant, weak though devoted, who while they kept right with God themselves, had evidently no power to initiate reform amongst their fellows, scarcely tallies with the energetic and drastic measures taken against the evils in Neh. xiii.

Its link with the other post-captivity writings, important though it is for our present purpose, is but one of many connections in which this last book of the Old Testament merits our study. For various reasons Malachi is amongst the most important as well as the most interesting of the shorter prophetic Scriptures. One of these is that, like its counterpart in the New Testament the Epistle of Jude, it contains an unusually large number of allusions to, and quotations or semi-quotations from the earlier writings, thus serving as it were to bind them all together, and to emphasize their truth and unity. For example, we are taken back at chap. ii. 15 to the institution of marriage in Eden; at chap. i. 2, 3 to God's choice of Jacob and rejection of Esau; at chap. iii. 4 to the giving of the Law; at chap. ii. 4-8 to the appointment of the

priesthood and the covenant made with the tribe of Levi; at chap. iii. 5 to the ministry of Elijah. Again, chap. ii. 10 appears to be a composite quotation from Deut. xxxii. 6 and Isa. xliii. 1; chap. iii. 1, "He shall prepare the way before Me," is a reference to Isa. xl. 3; and chap. iii. 3, "As a refiner . . . purge them as gold and silver," to Zech. xiii. 9. Chap. ii. 14, "The wife of thy youth," is a quotation from Prov. v. 18; chap. ii. 17, "Ye have wearied the Lord," is linked with Isa. vii. 13; xliii. 24; chap. iii. 14, "What profit" in serving God, with Job xxi. 15; and so on almost indefinitely.

But while our book, as these references show, forms so fitting a close to the Old Testament, it also serves admirably for an introduction to the New Testament. It announces the mission of the Baptist in words which Mark quotes at the very beginning of his Gospel, and which are also quoted in Matthew and Luke. It intimates too that coming of Elijah, which found at least a measure of its fulfilment in John's ministry (see Luke i. 17). So that, as one has said, "If John prepared the way for Christ, Malachi prepared the way for John."

Again, the reference in Mal. iii. 1 to the Lord as appearing suddenly in His Temple to purge it, while it points to something which is still future, prepares us at the same time for the record in the Gospels of how He purged the temple when on earth. And the emphasis which Malachi, beyond any previous writer, lays upon God's relationship to His people as "Father" (chap. i. 6; ii. 10; iii. 17), prepares us for the use of that same term, no less than sixteen times, in the Sermon on the Mount.

Still another link with the New Testament is found in the fact that the character of the declension or apostasy described in Malachi, while it differs widely from that against which the earlier prophets witnessed, corresponds closely with what we see in full development in the Gospels. There is no more the old-time inclination to idolatry in the literal sense; but there is that outward formal religion without the power which ultimately blossomed into Pharisaism, and there is that tendency towards scepticism and questioning of God's Word which produced Sadduceeism.

This change of direction in the apostasy is of special interest to us, because something similar appears in the history of the Church. In the earlier stages of it all declension tended to take the form of idolatry, not the old idolatry of Israel, but a newer—the worship of images, saints, and relics. In recent times there has, however, come about a change, and much of present-day apostasy is away from religion of any kind. As in the time of Malachi, God's Word is called in question, and all His claims upon men are denied. Even the indifference to the marriage bond shewn in Mal. ii. 14-16, as well as the various other social evils referred to in chap. iii. 5, are at least as much characteristic of our days as of those of the prophet.

In connection with this matter, a comparison of Malachi with the epistles to the churches in Rev. ii. and iii. is interesting, more particularly of course with the last one to Laodicea. So also is the similarity, already hinted at, between Malachi and Jude. As in Malachi so in the churches, we find failure of leaders, the mixing of God's people with the nations, a name to live while

they were dead, the saying and thinking that all is well though exactly the opposite is the case, and finally, the sudden coming upon them of the Lord Himself. Again, in Jude as in Malachi, we find at the beginning a reference to God's love for His people (see Jude 1 R.V.), and there follows in each a long passage descriptive of the apostasy. This, both in Jude and in Malachi, is shewn to be two-sided all the way through. Those who "deny the Only Master and Lord," also "turn the grace of God into lasciviousness" (Jude 4). Those who profane the worship of God and question His words (Mal. i.), also debase themselves by gross immorality (Mal. ii. and iii.). Finally, in each book there is seen a faithful remnant who "spake often one to another," seeking thus to "build themselves up on their most holy faith," and who stand, both in Malachi and in Jude, in sharpest contrast with the scoffers of the preceding verses. To these is given the promise of reward when the Lord comes, a place amongst His "jewels" in Malachi, a setting "before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy" in Jude. May we each be diligent that we, like them, may be "found of Him in peace, without spot, and blameless" (2 Pet. iii. 14) at His coming. So shall we earn His "Well done, good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things; I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

## CHAPTER XV

### THE FAILURE OF THE PRIESTHOOD

IN this message of God to Israel through Malachi, with which the Old Testament Scriptures are brought to a close, there is one remarkable and solemn feature to which we would like to draw attention. It is that a large section of it, beginning at chap. i. 6, after the introductory verses, and reaching at least to chap. ii. 13, is addressed to the priests, and brings home to them their failures and sins in stern language. This feature will, however, cause us no surprise, when we recall what Nehemiah, in the final chapter of his book, had to say concerning the evil activities of Eliashib the high priest and some of his friends. Indeed the words of Nehemiah's prayer to God in verse 29 of that chapter might well stand as a sub-title for this particular section of the book of Malachi. "Remember them, O my God," he says, "for they have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites." Compare with them Mal. ii. 8, "Ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the Lord of Hosts."

The wrongdoings of these priests, as described in Neh. xiii., were mainly of two kinds, desecration of the House of God, in verses 5-9, and alliances in marriage and otherwise with the enemies of God, in verses 4 and 28. In the passage in Malachi we find the same two evils



## THE FAILURE OF THE PRIESTHOOD 87

dealt with, the former in chap. i., and the latter in chap. ii. In fact that section of his prophecy in which the priests are addressed is divided into two very definite parts at the junction of the chapters, the first of which deals with their sin in relation to the service of God itself, while the second deals with their sin in relation to the people of God, and to the nations surrounding them. It will be noticed that each part has the expression "O Priests" in its opening verse (chap. i. 6; ii. 1), and that in both they are told how unacceptable their offerings are, though a different reason is given in each case. In chap. i. 10, 13, it is because of irreverence and other irregularities in the act of worship itself, but in chap. ii. 13, it is because of irregularities and sin in their lives generally, and especially because of wrongs connected with their marital relationships. A further development of this line of truth is given at chap. iii. 4, where God tells them that the offerings will become once more acceptable after they have been purged from these evils.

This twofold failure of the priests depicted by Malachi has relation, as will be seen, to the two aspects which, from the very beginning, their ministry was designed to have, aspects which are nowhere perhaps more plainly described than in Deut. xxxiii. 10. There, in connection with the blessing of Levi, it is said on the one hand, "They shall put incense before Thee, and whole burnt sacrifice upon Thine altar," and on the other, "They shall teach Jacob Thy judgments, and Israel Thy law." To both these statements Malachi's words stand in sharp contrast; for as compared with the former he says in chap. i. 7, "Ye offer polluted

bread upon Mine altar," and as compared with the latter he declares in chap. ii. 8, "Ye have caused many to stumble at the law."

Another interesting comparison is that between these two aspects of their service, and the two instances of faithfulness on the part of men of Levi in the wilderness, which confirmed God's choice of that tribe for the priesthood. Malachi himself points us to both those episodes by the expressions he uses. By using in chap. ii. 5 the phrase, "My covenant was with him of life and peace," he reminds us of God's message in Num. xxv. 12, 13 to Phineas, who in his zeal had slain two of the evildoers at Baalpeor. "I will give unto him," He said, "My covenant of peace . . . even the covenant of an everlasting priesthood." Again, when Malachi uses the phrase, "Your blessings" in chap. ii. 2, he takes us back to Exod. xxxii. 29, where Moses on the occasion of their execution of judgment upon the calf worshippers, said to the Levites, "Consecrate yourselves to-day to the Lord . . . that He may bestow upon you a blessing." That the "blessing" involved priesthood is made clear in Deut. xxxiii. 8-11; and since their act in Exod. xxxii. was to avenge the insult offered to God's worship, and the act of Phineas in Num. xxv. to avenge the wrong of association with the Midianitish women, it will be easily seen how close is the correspondence with the two sides of the failure in Malachi's days, as well as with the two aspects of the priesthood which have been mentioned.

What all this may suggest for our present-day instruction will be evident, if alongside Malachi we place 1st Peter, an epistle in which the "fear" due to our God

## THE FAILURE OF THE PRIESTHOOD 89

is given similar prominence to that which it gets in the former book, being mentioned about seven times in each. There in chap. ii. we find the fullest reference anywhere made to the New Testament doctrine of the priesthood of believers; and as we consider the passage we are at once struck by the fact that it also is presented in two aspects. In verse 5 we are described as "an holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ"; but in verse 9 we are "a royal priesthood to show forth the praises of Him who hath called us." Thus we see that, as with Israel's priests of old, we have in our priestly capacity a twofold service to perform. It is ours, on the one hand to go into God's presence to worship Him, and on the other to go forth amongst our fellowmen in order to show forth His "excellencies" (R.V.). Each of these is a glorious privilege, but each at the same time lays upon us a solemn responsibility. In either respect there may be, yea often has been, failure; and so close is the link between them that failure in one invariably produces failure in the other. The worshipping priest is a "holy" priest (v. 5), therefore any inconsistency or sin in outward life must render it impossible for him "to offer up spiritual sacrifices" that are "acceptable." So on the other hand, the witnessing priest is a "royal" priest, who can only "shew forth the excellencies" of his Lord, in so far as they have made impression on his own character during worship and communion.

In light of these truths, and in view of the wretched failure of the priests in Malachi, should not we ask: What of our worship? Do we always give to God the "honour" due to Him as our Father, and the "fear"

due to Him as our Master (Mal. i. 6)? Or do we at times in our very worship meetings say or think, "What a weariness is it" (v. 13)? Have we ever the feeling that anything "torn" or "lame" or "sick" is good enough for God's offering? Is there a possibility that concerning any meeting of ours the Lord might say, "Oh that there were one among you that would shut the doors, that ye might not kindle fire on My altar in vain" (Mal. i. 10, R.V.)?

Again, what of our priestly testimony? How do we represent our God amongst men? Are we shewing forth His excellencies, or are we "causing many to stumble" (Mal. ii. 8) by misrepresenting Him? Are we to be found in closer association with the sons and daughters "of a strange god" (Mal. ii. 11), than with our brethren? If so, hear His message of warning, "The Lord will cut off the man that doeth this, the master and the scholar" (Mal. ii. 12).

But perhaps we think that these Old Testament words of rebuke and condemnation are too strong to be applicable to-day. Let us turn then from the last of the prophets to the last epistle to the churches, that to the Laodiceans in Rev. iii., that we may see what the Lord has to say to His backsliding people there. Does He look upon the matter more lightly? He says, "Thou . . . knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." Does He pronounce a lesser judgment? His words are "BECAUSE THOU ART LUKEWARM, . . . I WILL SPUE THEE OUT OF MY MOUTH."

## APPENDIX

### A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

IN our last chapter, when dealing with Malachi's message to the priests, reference was made to the fact that our priestly service, as seen in 1 Peter ii. 5-9, has two sides to it, just as priestly work in Old Testament times had. The priest has the privilege of access to God in worship, etc., on the one hand, and of representing Him amongst men, on the other.

Of these two aspects of priesthood we find various illustrations in the Scriptures. Some are well known, as the story of Moses in Exod. xxxiv., which tells how he used to go into the presence of the Lord, and then come out again with such a shining of God's glory on his countenance that the people were afraid to look upon him. Other such pictures are liable to be passed over unnoticed, and of these there is one to which we would like here to call attention, because of its remarkable character. Part of it lies hidden in two lists of names in 2 Samuel, and part of it is suggested by certain expressions used concerning Absalom in the same book.

Before turning to these, let us take note of one or two points with regard to the manner in which priesthood is brought before us in 1 Peter ii., and more particularly to the setting of that passage, which

follows a number of references to our relationship with God as His children. In chap. i., we have been begotten of God (v. 3); we are His children and He is our Father (vv. 14, 17); we have been born again into that relationship through the Word (v. 23). Then in the opening verses of chap. ii., we are "newborn babes," who must grow by that same Word; and almost immediately after we are said to have become a "holy priesthood."

In keeping with this link of connection between our sonship and our priesthood are the references in Malachi to sonship and Fatherhood (chap. i. 6 and chap. ii. 10), which occur at the beginning and the end of his two addresses to the priests; and so is also the close connection between Sonship and Priesthood in the case of our Lord Himself in Heb. iv. 14; v. 5, 6; and vii. 28.

This being so, we might well speak of the priests of 1 Peter ii. as Son-priests; and since verse 9 gives us the additional point that they are "royal," we may call them Royal-son-priests.

Now, bearing this in mind, let us examine the passages to which we have referred in 2 Samuel, for we shall there find some royal-son-priests, from whom, although their sphere of service was altogether different from ours, we may learn something that will be of profit to us. In chap. viii. 16-18 we have a list of the officers of David's court, a list which is prefaced by the statement in verse 15 that "David executed judgment and justice unto all his people." This evidently implies that the officers named held their various positions for that very purpose.

On reading through the list, we find at the end the

words, "And David's sons were chief rulers," in connection with which it may occur to us that "chief rulers" is a somewhat ambiguous term, after the more exact ones used in every other instance. The margin of our Bibles does not help us much by substituting the word "princes," but when we turn to the Revised Version we are perhaps even more bewildered when we read that "David's sons were PRIESTS."

Yet "priests" is the actual word used here, the same which had already occurred in verse 17 in connection with the Levitical priests, Zadok and Ahimelech, and the same which is translated "priest," more than 700 times elsewhere in the Scriptures. Indeed in our Authorized Version there are only five exceptions to this rendering, and in four of these the Revised Version alters it to "priest" as elsewhere, the only one left being in Lev. xiv. 16, where for the sake of euphony it is translated by the pronoun "his own," the word "priest" having already occurred in the sentence.

But this uniformity of rendering must surely increase our wonder; and we ask, How could David's sons be priests? That there was no question of usurping the functions of the priests of God is clear from the fact that these also are named in the list. Let us turn to chap. xx. 23-26 where we find a similar list of those in office in David's closing days, after the Absalom rebellion was over; and see if it will throw any light on the matter. As we go through it we discover that most of David's old servants are with him still, but at the end of it, instead of the statement (R.V.), "And David's sons were priests," we have, "And Ira the Jairite was priest unto David" (also R.V.). With the change of

person we shall deal later, but meanwhile does not the expression "priest unto David" suggest the solution of our difficulty? These men were not priests unto God as were Zadok and Abiathar, but priests "UNTO DAVID." That is to say, they held some kind of official position as intermediaries between David and his subjects, with a view to the due execution by him of "judgment and justice," so like in principle to the position occupied by members of the house of Aaron as between God and His people, that the same Hebrew word "kohen" served to describe it. We may add that in Solomon's court list, as given in 1 Kings iv. 2-5, a similar officer is named (again see R.V.), who had the additional title of "The King's Friend."

What the duties of the position were we may not be able to say with exactness, but the use of the word "priest" shews that it must have been for the purpose of bringing the king and his subjects into closer contact, and of presenting their causes and petitions to him. If so, who would be so fitted for the office as David's own sons? Who would, on the one hand, have such access as they to their father's presence; and who, on the other hand, might be expected to have David's interests so much at heart, or would so desire to set him in the best light before his subjects? Therefore it was that these men, who were already "royal" and "sons" were also made "priests unto David."

But how then did it come to pass that, when the list of chap. xx. was compiled, these royal-son-priests were in office no longer, and a stranger, not elsewhere mentioned, but who belonged to the other side of Jordan, where David had recently been in exile,



occupied their place? Failure on their part there must have been, and, as already mentioned, there are things said in connection with Absalom, which throw light upon this sad part of the story. To go into it fully would require a relation of the entire history; but briefly it was thus. One son-priest, Amnon, was slain by the orders of another, Absalom; and the latter having himself fled from David's justice, was in exile for three years, during which time he could not, of course, act as "priest unto David." Nor was the case much better when, having returned, he "dwelt two full years in Jerusalem, and saw not the king's face."

This privilege having been restored to him through Joab's intervention (chap. xiv. 33), we are given immediately after, in chap. xv., a sample of how he did his work as an intermediary between the people and their king. He took up his position, we are told, at the gate, the place of judgment, and "when any man came to the king for judgment (v. 2), . . . Absalom said unto him, See, thy matters are good and right, but there is no man deputed of the king to hear thee" (v. 3). What a slander on his father this was, especially since he himself and his brothers had, as we have seen, been "deputed" for service of that very nature. Then he had the effrontery to add, "Oh that I were made judge in the land, that every man might come unto me, and I would do him justice" (v. 4). Thus did this faithless royal-son-priest daily misrepresent the king, and "shew forth" his own "praises" instead of David's; until he "stole the hearts of the men of Israel" (v. 6). Concerning the king's other sons there is little on

record, but David's last words about them in chap. xxiii. 5, 6 go far to shew that most of them were not at all what they should have been.

In the circumstances it is surely not unreasonable to infer it was on account of their failure in these matters that they were superseded by Ira, the Jairite, who, without the apparent fitness for the office which they possessed, had at least love to his master, and a faithful spirit that enabled him to carry out his duties more successfully than they had done.

It should scarcely be necessary to emphasize the lesson contained in all this for us. As royal-son-priests unto God, our twofold responsibility is, as we have said, to be much in His presence, and then to fittingly represent Him. Are we so doing from day to day, or are we failing in it as the sons of David failed, with the result that we seldom see our King's face, and are apt to "shew forth" our own praises rather than His. If so let us beware. Israel as a "kingdom of priests" failed, and were superseded. The Levitical priests failed and were superseded. David's sons, in a similar but earthly position, failed and were superseded. What will the next sad story of failure be?

