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Prison Ministry

**Prophets and Kings** (1917) Edition Chapter 45 – “The Return of the Exiles”

 The advent of the army of Cyrus before the walls of Babylon was to the Jews a sign that their deliverance from captivity was drawing nigh. More than a century before the birth of Cyrus, Inspiration had mentioned him by name, and had caused a record to be made of the actual work he should do in taking the city of Babylon unawares, and in preparing the way for the release of the children of the captivity. Through Isaiah the word had been spoken:

 "Thus saith the Lord to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; . . . to open before him the two-leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut; I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron: and I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I, the Lord, which call thee by thy name, am the God of Israel." Isaiah 45:1-3.

 In the unexpected entry of the army of the Persian conqueror into the heart of the Babylonian capital by way of the channel of the river whose waters had been turned aside, and through the inner gates that in careless security had been left open and unprotected, the Jews had abundant evidence of the literal fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy concerning the sudden overthrow of their oppressors. And this should have been to them an unmistakable sign that God was shaping the affairs of nations in their behalf; for inseparably linked with the prophecy outlining the manner of Babylon's capture and fall were the words:

 "Cyrus, he is My shepherd, and shall perform all My pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid." "I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways: he shall build My city, and he shall let go My captives, not for price nor reward, saith the Lord of hosts." Isaiah 44:28; 45:13.

 Nor were these the only prophecies upon which the exiles had opportunity to base their hope of speedy deliverance. The writings of Jeremiah were within their reach, and in these was plainly set forth the length of time that should elapse before the restoration of Israel from Babylon. "When seventy years are accomplished," the Lord had foretold through His messenger, "I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the Lord, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations." Jeremiah 25:12. Favor would be shown the remnant of Judah, in answer to fervent prayer. "I will be found of you, saith the Lord: and I will turn away your captivity, and I will gather you from all the nations, and from all the places whither I have driven you, saith the Lord; and I will bring you again into the place whence I caused you to be carried away captive." Jeremiah 29:14.

 Often had Daniel and his companions gone over these and similar prophecies outlining God's purpose for His people. And now, as the rapid course of events betokened the mighty hand of God at work among the nations, Daniel gave special thought to the promises made to Israel. His faith in the prophetic word led him to enter into experiences foretold by the sacred writers. "After seventy years be accomplished at Babylon," the Lord had declared, "I will visit you, and perform My good word toward you, in causing you to return. . . . I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall ye call upon Me, and ye shall go and pray unto Me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart." Verses 10-13.

 Shortly before the fall of Babylon, when Daniel was meditating on these prophecies and seeking God for an understanding of the times, a series of visions was given him concerning the rise and fall of kingdoms. With the first vision, as recorded in the seventh chapter of the book of Daniel, an interpretation was given; yet not all was made clear to the prophet. "My cogitations much troubled me," he wrote of his experience at the time, "and my countenance changed in me: but I kept the matter in my heart." Daniel 7:28.

 Through another vision further light was thrown upon the events of the future; and it was at the close of this vision that Daniel heard "one saint speaking, and another saint said unto that certain saint which spake, How long shall be the vision?" Daniel 8:13. The answer that was given, "Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed" (verse 14), filled him with perplexity. Earnestly he sought for the meaning of the vision. He could not understand the relation sustained by the seventy years' captivity, as foretold through Jeremiah, to the twenty-three hundred years that in vision he heard the heavenly visitant declare should elapse before the cleansing of God's sanctuary. The angel Gabriel gave him a partial interpretation; yet when the prophet heard the words, "The vision . . . shall be for many days," he fainted away. "I Daniel fainted," he records of his experience, "and was sick certain days; afterward I rose up, and did the king's business; and I was astonished at the vision, but none understood it." Verses 26, 27.

 Still burdened in behalf of Israel, Daniel studied anew the prophecies of Jeremiah. They were very plain--so plain that he understood by these testimonies recorded in books "the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem." Daniel 9:2.

 With faith founded on the sure word of prophecy, Daniel pleaded with the Lord for the speedy fulfillment of these promises. He pleaded for the honor of God to be preserved. In his petition he identified himself fully with those who had fallen short of the divine purpose, confessing their sins as his own.

 "I set my face unto the Lord God," the prophet declared, "to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes: and I prayed unto the Lord my God, and made my confession." Verses 3, 4. Though Daniel had long been in the service of God, and had been spoken of by heaven as "greatly beloved," yet he now appeared before God as a sinner, urging the great need of the people he loved. His prayer was eloquent in its simplicity, and intensely earnest. Hear him pleading:

 "O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love Him, and to them that keep His commandments; we have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from Thy precepts and from Thy judgments; neither have we hearkened unto Thy servants the prophets, which spake in Thy name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.

 "O Lord, righteousness belongeth unto Thee, but unto us confusion of faces, as at this day; to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and unto all Israel, that are near, and that are far off, through all the countries whither Thou hast driven them, because of their trespass that they have trespassed against Thee. . . .

 "To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgiveness, though we have rebelled against Him." "O Lord, according to all Thy righteousness, I beseech Thee, let Thine anger and Thy fury be turned away from Thy city Jerusalem, Thy holy mountain: because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Thy people are become a reproach to all that are about us.

 "Now therefore, O our God, hear the prayer of Thy servant, and his supplications, and cause Thy face to shine upon Thy sanctuary that is desolate, for the Lord's sake. O my God, incline Thine ear, and hear; open Thine eyes, and behold our desolations, and the city which is called by Thy name: for we do not present our supplications before Thee for our righteousness, but for Thy great mercies. {PK 556.1}

 "O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for Thine own sake, O my God: for Thy city and Thy people are called by Thy name." Verses 4-9, 16-19.

 Heaven was bending low to hear the earnest supplication of the prophet. Even before he had finished his plea for pardon and restoration, the mighty Gabriel again appeared to him, and called his attention to the vision he had seen prior to the fall of Babylon and the death of Belshazzar. And then the angel outlined before him in detail the period of the seventy weeks, which was to begin at the time of "the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem." Verse 25.

 Daniel's prayer had been offered "in the first year of Darius" (verse 1), the Median monarch whose general, Cyrus, had wrested from Babylonia the scepter of universal rule. The reign of Darius was honored of God. To him was sent the angel Gabriel, "to confirm and to strengthen him." Daniel 11:1. Upon his death, within about two years of the fall of Babylon, Cyrus succeeded to the throne, and the beginning of his reign marked the completion of the seventy years since the first company of Hebrews had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar from their Judean home to Babylon.

 The deliverance of Daniel from the den of lions had been used of God to create a favorable impression upon the mind of Cyrus the Great. The sterling qualities of the man of God as a statesman of farseeing ability led the Persian ruler to show him marked respect and to honor his judgment. And now, just at the time God had said He would cause His temple at Jerusalem to be rebuilt, He moved upon Cyrus as His agent to discern the prophecies concerning himself, with which Daniel was so familiar, and to grant the Jewish people their liberty.

 As the king saw the words foretelling, more than a hundred years before his birth, the manner in which Babylon should be taken; as he read the message addressed to him by the Ruler of the universe, "I girded thee, though thou hast not known Me: that they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that there is none beside Me;" as he saw before his eyes the declaration of the eternal God, "For Jacob My servant's sake, and Israel Mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name: I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known Me;" as he traced the inspired record, "I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways: he shall build My city, and he shall let go My captives, not for price nor reward," his heart was profoundly moved, and he determined to fulfill his divinely appointed mission. Isaiah 45:5, 6, 4, 13. He would let the Judean captives go free; he would help them restore the temple of Jehovah.

 In a written proclamation published "throughout all his kingdom," Cyrus made known his desire to provide for the return of the Hebrews and for the rebuilding of their temple. "The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth," the king gratefully acknowledged in this public proclamation; "and He hath charged me to build Him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all His people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, . . . and build the house of the Lord God of Israel, (He is the God,) which is in Jerusalem. And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering." Ezra 1:1-4.

 "Let the house be builded," he further directed regarding the temple structure, "the place where they offered sacrifices, and let the foundations thereof be strongly laid; the height thereof threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof threescore cubits; with three rows of great stones, and a row of new timber: and let the expenses be given out of the king's house: and also let the golden and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple which is at Jerusalem, and brought unto Babylon, be restored, and brought again unto the temple which is at Jerusalem." Ezra 6:3-5. {PK 558.2}

 Tidings of this decree reached the farthermost provinces of the king's realm, and everywhere among the children of the dispersion there was great rejoicing. Many, like Daniel, had been studying the prophecies, and had been seeking God for His promised intervention in behalf of Zion. And now their prayers were being answered; and with heartfelt joy they could unite in singing:

 "When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion,

 We were like them that dream.

 Then was our mouth filled with laughter,

 And our tongue with singing:

 Then said they among the heathen,

 The Lord hath done great things for them.

 The Lord hath done great things for us;

 Whereof we are glad." Psalm 126:1-3.

 "The chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised"--these were the goodly remnant, about fifty thousand strong, from among the Jews in the lands of exile, who determined to take advantage of the wonderful opportunity offered them "to go up to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem." Their friends did not permit them to go empty-handed. "All they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things." And to these and many other voluntary offerings were added "the vessels of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem; . . . even those did Cyrus king of Persia bring forth by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, . . . five thousand and four hundred" in number, for use in the temple that was to be rebuilt. Ezra 1:5-11.

 Upon Zerubbabel (known also as Sheshbazzar), a descendant of King David, Cyrus placed the responsibility of acting as governor of the company returning to Judea; and with him was associated Joshua the high priest. The long journey across the desert wastes was accomplished in safety, and the happy company, grateful to God for His many mercies, at once undertook the work of re-establishing that which had been broken down and destroyed. "The chief of the fathers" led out in offering of their substance to help defray the expense of rebuilding the temple; and the people, following their example, gave freely of their meager store. See Ezra 2:64-70.

 As speedily as possible, an altar was erected on the site of the ancient altar in the temple court. To the exercises connected with the dedication of this altar, the people had "gathered themselves together as one man;" and there they united in re-establishing the sacred services that had been interrupted at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. Before separating to dwell in the homes they were endeavoring to restore, "they kept also the Feast of Tabernacles." Ezra 3:1-6.

 The setting up of the altar of daily burnt offerings greatly cheered the faithful remnant. Heartily they entered into the preparations necessary for the rebuilding of the temple, gathering courage as these preparations advanced from month to month. They had for many years been deprived of the visible tokens of God's presence. And now, surrounded as they were by many sad reminders of the apostasy of their fathers, they longed for some abiding token of divine forgiveness and favor. Above the regaining of personal property and ancient privileges, they valued the approval of God. Wonderfully had He wrought in their behalf, and they felt the assurance of His presence with them; yet they desired greater blessings still. With joyous anticipation they looked forward to the time when, with temple rebuilt, they might behold the shining forth of His glory from within.

 The workmen engaged in the preparation of the building material, found among the ruins some of the immense stones brought to the temple site in the days of Solomon. These were made ready for use, and much new material was provided; and soon the work was advanced to the point where the foundation stone must be laid. This was done in the presence of many thousands who had assembled to witness the progress of the work and to give expression to their joy in having a part in it. While the cornerstone was being set in position, the people, accompanied by the trumpets of the priests and the cymbals of the sons of Asaph, "sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord; because He is good, for His mercy endureth forever toward Israel." Verse 11.

 The house that was about to be rebuilt had been the subject of many prophecies concerning the favor that God desired to show Zion, and all who were present at the laying of the cornerstone should have entered heartily into the spirit of the occasion. Yet mingled with the music and the shouts of praise that were heard on that glad day, was a discordant note. "Many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice." Verse 12.

 It was natural that sadness should fill the hearts of these aged men, as they thought of the results of long-continued impenitence. Had they and their generation obeyed God, and carried out His purpose for Israel, the temple built by Solomon would not have been destroyed and the captivity would not have been necessary. But because of ingratitude and disloyalty they had been scattered among the heathen. {PK 564.1}

 Conditions were now changed. In tender mercy the Lord had again visited His people and allowed them to return to their own land. Sadness because of the mistakes of the past should have given way to feelings of great joy. God had moved upon the heart of Cyrus to aid them in rebuilding the temple, and this should have called forth expressions of profound gratitude. But some failed of discerning God's opening providences. Instead of rejoicing, they cherished thoughts of discontent and discouragement. They had seen the glory of Solomon's temple, and they lamented because of the inferiority of the building now to be erected.

 The murmuring and complaining, and the unfavorable comparisons made, had a depressing influence on the minds of many and weakened the hands of the builders. The workmen were led to question whether they should proceed with the erection of a building that at the beginning was so freely criticized and was the cause of so much lamentation.

 There were many in the congregation, however, whose larger faith and broader vision did not lead them to view this lesser glory with such dissatisfaction. "Many shouted aloud for joy: so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off." Verses 12, 13.

 Could those who failed to rejoice at the laying of the foundation stone of the temple have foreseen the results of their lack of faith on that day, they would have been appalled. Little did they realize the weight of their words of disapproval and disappointment; little did they know how much their expressed dissatisfaction would delay the completion of the Lord's house.

 The magnificence of the first temple, and the imposing rites of its religious services, had been a source of pride to Israel before their captivity; but their worship had ofttimes been lacking in those qualities which God regards as most essential. The glory of the first temple, the splendor of its service, could not recommend them to God; for that which is alone of value in His sight, they did not offer. They did not bring Him the sacrifice of a humble and contrite spirit.

 It is when the vital principles of the kingdom of God are lost sight of, that ceremonies become multitudinous and extravagant. It is when the character building is neglected, when the adornment of the soul is lacking, when the simplicity of godliness is despised, that pride and love of display demand magnificent church edifices, splendid adornings, and imposing ceremonials. But in all this God is not honored. He values His church, not for its external advantages, but for the sincere piety which distinguishes it from the world. He estimates it according to the growth of its members in the knowledge of Christ, according to their progress in spiritual experience. He looks for the principles of love and goodness. Not all the beauty of art can bear comparison with the beauty of temper and character to be revealed in those who are Christ's representatives.

 A congregation may be the poorest in the land. It may be without the attractions of any outward show; but if the members possess the principles of the character of Christ, angels will unite with them in their worship. The praise and thanksgiving from grateful hearts will ascend to God as a sweet oblation.

 "Give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good:

 For His mercy endureth forever.

 Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,

 Whom He hath redeemed from the hand of the enemy."

 "Sing unto Him, sing psalms unto Him:

 Talk ye of all His wondrous works.

 Glory ye in His holy name:

 Let the heart of them rejoice that seek the Lord."

 "For He satisfieth the longing soul,

 And filleth the hungry soul with goodness."

 Psalm 107:1, 2; 105:2, 3; Psalm 107:9. {PK 566.1}

Next Mailing: **Prophets and Kings** (1917) Edition Chapter 46 – “The Prophets of God Helping Them.”