February 25, 2017

Prison Ministry

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

Close by the Israelites who had set themselves to the task of rebuilding the temple, dwelt the Samaritans, a mixed race that had sprung up through the intermarriage of heathen colonists from the provinces of Assyria with the remnant of the ten tribes which had been left in Samaria and Galilee. In later years the Samaritans claimed to worship the true God, but in heart and practice they were idolaters. It is true, they held that their idols were but to remind them of the living God, the Ruler of the universe; nevertheless the people were prone to reverence graven images.

During the period of the restoration, these Samaritans came to be known as "the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin." Hearing that "the children of the captivity builded the temple unto the Lord God of Israel," "they came to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers," and expressed a desire to unite with them in its erection. "Let us build with you," they proposed; "for we seek your God, as ye do; and we do sacrifice unto Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assur, which brought us up hither." But the privilege they asked was refused them. "Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God," the leaders of the Israelites declared; "but we ourselves together will build unto the Lord God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us." Ezra 4:1-3.

Only a remnant had chosen to return from Babylon; and now, as they undertake a work seemingly beyond their strength, their nearest neighbors come with an offer of help. The Samaritans refer to their worship of the true God, and express a desire to share the privileges and blessings connected with the temple service. "We seek your God, as ye do," they declare. "Let us build with you." But had the Jewish leaders accepted this offer of assistance, they would have opened a door for the entrance of idolatry. They discerned the insincerity of the Samaritans. They realized that help gained through an alliance with these men would be as nothing in comparison with the blessing they might expect to receive by following the plain commands of Jehovah.

Regarding the relation that Israel should sustain to surrounding peoples, the Lord had declared through Moses: "Thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor show mercy unto them: neither shalt thou make marriages with them; . . . for they will turn away thy son from following Me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly." "Thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God, and the Lord hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto Himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth." Deuteronomy 7:2-4; 14:2.

The result that would follow an entrance into covenant relation with surrounding nations was plainly foretold. "The Lord shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other," Moses had declared; "and there thou shalt serve other gods, which neither thou nor thy fathers have known, even wood and stone. And among these nations shalt thou find no ease, neither shall the sole of thy foot have rest: but the Lord shall give thee there a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and sorrow of mind: and thy life shall hang in doubt before thee; and thou shalt fear day and night, and shalt have none assurance of thy life: in the morning thou shalt say, Would God it were even! and at even thou shalt say, Would God it were morning! for the fear of thine heart wherewith thou shalt fear, and for the sight of thine eyes which thou shalt see." Deuteronomy 28:64-67. "But if from thence thou shalt seek the Lord thy God," the promise had been, "thou shalt find Him, if thou seek Him with all thy heart and with all thy soul." Deuteronomy 4:29.

Zerubbabel and his associates were familiar with these and many like scriptures; and in the recent captivity they had evidence after evidence of their fulfillment. And now, having repented of the evils that had brought upon them and their fathers the judgments foretold so plainly through Moses; having turned with all the heart to God, and renewed their covenant relationship with Him, they had been permitted to return to Judea, that they might restore that which had been destroyed. Should they, at the very beginning of their undertaking, enter into a covenant with idolaters?

"Thou shalt make no covenant with them," God had said; and those who had recently rededicated themselves to the Lord at the altar set up before the ruins of His temple, realized that the line of demarcation between His people and the world is ever to be kept unmistakably distinct. They refused to enter into alliance with those who, though familiar with the requirements of God's law, would not yield to its claims.

The principles set forth in Deuteronomy for the instruction of Israel are to be followed by God's people to the end of time. True prosperity is dependent on the continuance of our covenant relationship with God. Never can we afford to compromise principle by entering into alliance with those who do not fear Him.

There is constant danger that professing Christians will come to think that in order to have influence with worldlings, they must to a certain extent conform to the world. But though such a course may appear to afford great advantages, it always ends in spiritual loss. Against every subtle influence that seeks entrance by means of flattering inducements from the enemies of truth, God's people must strictly guard. They are pilgrims and strangers in this world, traveling a path beset with danger. To the ingenious subterfuges and alluring inducements held out to tempt from allegiance, they must give no heed.

It is not the open and avowed enemies of the cause of God that are most to be feared. Those who, like the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin, come with smooth words and fair speeches, apparently seeking for friendly alliance with God's children, have greater power to deceive. Against such every soul should be on the alert, lest some carefully concealed and masterly snare take him unaware. And especially today, while earth's history is closing, the Lord requires of His children a vigilance that knows no relaxation. But though the conflict is a ceaseless one, none are left to struggle alone. Angels help and protect those who walk humbly before God. Never will our Lord betray one who trusts in Him. As His children draw near to Him for protection from evil, in pity and love He lifts up for them a standard against the enemy. Touch them not, He says; for they are Mine. I have graven them upon the palms of My hands.

Untiring in their opposition, the Samaritans "weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building, and hired counselors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius." Ezra 4:4, 5. By false reports they aroused suspicion in minds easily led to suspect. But for many years the powers of evil were held in check, and the people in Judea had liberty to continue their work.

While Satan was striving to influence the highest powers in the kingdom of Medo-Persia to show disfavor to God's people, angels worked in behalf of the exiles. The controversy was one in which all heaven was interested. Through the prophet Daniel we are given a glimpse of this mighty struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil.

For three weeks Gabriel wrestled with the powers of darkness, seeking to counteract the influences at work on the mind of Cyrus; and before the contest closed, Christ Himself came to Gabriel's aid. "The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me one and twenty days," Gabriel declares; "but, lo, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me; and I remained there with the kings of Persia." Daniel 10:13. All that heaven could do in behalf of the people of God was done. The victory was finally gained; the forces of the enemy were held in check all the days of Cyrus, and all the days of his son Cambyses, who reigned about seven and a half years.

This was a time of wonderful opportunity for the Jews. The highest agencies of heaven were working on the hearts of kings, and it was for the people of God to labor with the utmost activity to carry out the decree of Cyrus. They should have spared no effort to restore the temple and its services, and to re-establish themselves in their Judean homes. But in the day of God's power many proved unwilling. The opposition of their enemies was strong and determined, and gradually the builders lost heart. Some could not forget the scene at the laying of the cornerstone, when many had given expression to their lack of confidence in the enterprise. And as the Samaritans grew more bold, many of the Jews questioned whether, after all, the time had come to rebuild. The feeling soon became widespread. Many of the workmen, discouraged and disheartened, returned to their homes to take up the ordinary pursuits of life.

During the reign of Cambyses the work on the temple progressed slowly. And during the reign of the false Smerdis (called Artaxerxes in Ezra 4:7) the Samaritans induced the unscrupulous impostor to issue a decree forbidding the Jews to rebuild their temple and city.

For over a year the temple was neglected and well-nigh forsaken. The people dwelt in their homes and strove to attain temporal prosperity, but their situation was deplorable. Work as they might they did not prosper. The very elements of nature seemed to conspire against them. Because they had let the temple lie waste, the Lord sent upon their substance a wasting drought. God had bestowed upon them the fruits of field and garden, the corn and the wine and the oil, as a token of His favor; but because they had used these bountiful gifts so selfishly, the blessings were removed.

Such were the conditions existing during the early part of the reign of Darius Hystaspes. Spiritually as well as temporally, the Israelites were in a pitiable state. So long had they murmured and doubted; so long had they chosen to make personal interests first, while viewing with apathy the Lord's temple in ruins, that many had lost sight of God's purpose in restoring them to Judea; and these were saying, "The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built." Haggai 1:2.

But even this dark hour was not without hope for those whose trust was in God. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah were raised up to meet the crisis. In stirring testimonies these appointed messengers revealed to the people the cause of their troubles. The lack of temporal prosperity was the result of a neglect to put God's interests first, the prophets declared. Had the Israelites honored God, had they shown Him due respect and courtesy, by making the building of His house their first work, they would have invited His presence and blessing.

To those who had become discouraged, Haggai addressed the searching inquiry, "Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your ceiled houses, and this house lie waste? Now therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways." Why have you done so little? Why do you feel concern for your own buildings and unconcern for the Lord's building? Where is the zeal you once felt for the restoration of the Lord's house? What have you gained by serving self? The desire to escape poverty has led you to neglect the temple, but this neglect has brought upon you that which you feared. "Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes." Verses 4-6.

And then, in words that they could not fail to understand, the Lord revealed the cause that had brought them to want: "Ye looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the Lord of hosts. Because of Mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house. Therefore the heaven over you is stayed from dew, and the earth is stayed from her fruit. And I called for a drought upon the land, and upon the mountains, and upon the corn, and upon the new wine, and upon the oil, and upon that which the ground bringeth forth, and upon men, and upon cattle, and upon all the labor of the hands." Verses 9-11.

"Consider your ways," the Lord urged. "Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified." Verses 7, 8.

The message of counsel and reproof given through Haggai was taken to heart by the leaders and people of Israel. They felt that God was in earnest with them. They dared not disregard the repeated instruction sent them--that their prosperity, both temporal and spiritual, was dependent on faithful obedience to God's commands. Aroused by the warnings of the prophet, Zerubbabel and Joshua, "with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet." Verse 12.

As soon as Israel decided to obey, the words of reproof were followed by a message of encouragement. "Then spake Haggai . . . unto the people, saying, I am with you, saith the Lord. And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel" and of Joshua, and "of all the remnant of the people; and they came and did work in the house of the Lord of hosts, their God." Verses 13, 14.

In less than a month after the work on the temple was resumed, the builders received another comforting message. "Be strong, O Zerubbabel," the Lord Himself urged through His prophet; "be strong, O Joshua; . . . and be strong, all ye people of the land, saith the Lord, and work: for I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts." Haggai 2:4.

To Israel encamped before Mount Sinai the Lord had declared: "I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them: I am the Lord their God." Exodus 29:45, 46. And now, notwithstanding the fact that they had repeatedly "rebelled, and vexed His Holy Spirit" (Isaiah 63:10), God once more, through the messages of His prophet, was stretching out His hand to save. As a recognition of their co-operation with His purpose, He was renewing His covenant that His Spirit should remain among them; and He bade them, "Fear not."

To His children today the Lord declares, "Be strong, . . . and work: for I am with you." The Christian always has a strong helper in the Lord. The way of the Lord's helping we may not know; but this we do know: He will never fail those who put their trust in Him. Could Christians realize how many times the Lord has ordered their way, that the purposes of the enemy concerning them might not be accomplished, they would not stumble along complainingly. Their faith would be stayed on God, and no trial would have power to move them. They would acknowledge Him as their wisdom and efficiency, and He would bring to pass that which He desires to work out through them.

The earnest pleadings and the encouragements given through Haggai were emphasized and added to by Zechariah, whom God raised up to stand by his side in urging Israel to carry out the command to arise and build. Zechariah's first message was an assurance that God's word never fails and a promise of blessing to those who would hearken to the sure word of prophecy.

With fields lying waste, with their scant store of provisions rapidly failing, and surrounded as they were by unfriendly peoples, the Israelites nevertheless moved forward by faith in response to the call of God's messengers, and labored diligently to restore the ruined temple. It was a work requiring firm reliance upon God. As the people endeavored to do their part, and sought for a renewal of God's grace in heart and life, message after message was given them through Haggai and Zechariah, with assurances that their faith would be richly rewarded and that the word of God concerning the future glory of the temple whose walls they were rearing would not fail. In this very building would appear, in the fullness of time, the Desire of all nations as the Teacher and Saviour of mankind.

Thus the builders were not left to struggle alone; "with them were the prophets of God helping them;" and the Lord of hosts Himself had declared, "Be strong, . . . and work: for I am with you." Ezra 5:2; Haggai 2:4.

With heartfelt repentance and a willingness to advance by faith, came the promise of temporal prosperity. "From this day," the Lord declared, "will I bless you." Verse 19.

To Zerubbabel their leader--he who, through all the years since their return from Babylon, had been so sorely tried--was given a most precious message. The day was coming, the Lord declared, when all the enemies of His chosen people would be cast down. "In that day, saith the Lord of hosts, will I take thee, O Zerubbabel, My servant, . . . and will make thee as a signet: for I have chosen thee." Verse 23. Now the governor of Israel could see the meaning of the providence that had led him through discouragement and perplexity; he could discern God's purpose in it all.

This personal word to Zerubbabel has been left on record for the encouragement of God's children in every age. God has a purpose in sending trial to His children. He never leads them otherwise than they would choose to be led if they could see the end from the beginning, and discern the glory of the purpose that they are fulfilling. All that He brings upon them in test and trial comes that they may be strong to do and to suffer for Him.

The messages delivered by Haggai and Zechariah roused the people to put forth every possible effort for the rebuilding of the temple; but, as they worked, they were sadly harassed by the Samaritans and others who devised many hindrances. On one occasion the provincial officers of the Medo-Persian realm visited Jerusalem and requested the name of the one who had authorized the restoration of the building. If at that time the Jews had not been trusting in the Lord for guidance, this inquiry might have resulted disastrously to them. "But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, that they could not cause them to cease, till the matter came to Darius." Ezra 5:5. The officers were answered so wisely that they decided to write a letter to Darius Hystaspes, then the ruler of Medo-Persia, directing his attention to the original decree made by Cyrus, which commanded that the house of God at Jerusalem be rebuilt, and that the expenses for the same be paid from the king's treasury.

Darius searched for this decree, and found it; whereupon he directed those who had made the inquiry to allow the rebuilding of the temple to proceed. "Let the work of this house of God alone," he commanded; "let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God in his place.

"Moreover," Darius continued, "I make a decree what ye shall do to the elders of these Jews for the building of this house of God: that of the king's goods, even of the tribute beyond the river, forthwith expenses be given unto these men, that they be not hindered. And that which they have need of, both young bullocks, and rams, and lambs, for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the appointment of the priests which are at Jerusalem, let it be given them day by day without fail: that they may offer sacrifices of sweet savors unto the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king, and of his sons." Ezra 6:7-10.

The king further decreed that severe penalties be meted out to those who should in any wise alter the decree; and he closed with the remarkable statement: "The God that hath caused His name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with the speed." Verse 12. Thus the Lord prepared the way for the completion of the temple.

For months before this decree was made, the Israelites had kept on working by faith, the prophets of God still helping them by means of timely messages, through which the divine purpose for Israel was kept before the workers. Two months after Haggai's last recorded message was delivered, Zechariah had a series of visions regarding the work of God in the earth. These messages, given in the form of parables and symbols, came at a time of great uncertainty and anxiety, and were of peculiar significance to the men who were advancing in the name of the God of Israel. It seemed to the leaders as if the permission granted the Jews to rebuild was about to be withdrawn; the future appeared very dark. God saw that His people were in need of being sustained and cheered by a revelation of His infinite compassion and love.

In vision Zechariah heard the angel of the Lord inquiring, "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? And the Lord answered the angel that talked with me," Zechariah declared, "with good words and comfortable words.

"So the angel that communed with me said unto me, Cry thou, saying, 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 heathen that are at ease: for I was but a little displeased, and they helped forward the affliction. Therefore thus saith the Lord; I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies: My house shall be built in it, . . . and a line shall be stretched forth upon Jerusalem." Zechariah 1:12-16.

The prophet was now directed to predict, "Thus saith the Lord of hosts; My cities through prosperity shall yet be spread abroad; and the Lord shall yet comfort Zion, and shall yet choose Jerusalem." Verse 17. {PK 580.3}

Zechariah then saw the powers that had "scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem," symbolized by four horns. Immediately afterward he saw four carpenters, representing the agencies used by the Lord in restoring His people and the house of His worship. See verses 18-21.

"I lifted up mine eyes again," Zechariah said, "and looked, and behold a man with a measuring line in his hand. Then said I, Whither goest thou? And he said unto me, To measure Jerusalem, to see what is the breadth thereof, and what is the length thereof. And, behold, the angel that talked with me went forth, and another angel went out to meet him, and said unto him, Run, speak to this young man, saying, Jerusalem shall be inhabited as towns without walls for the multitude of men and cattle therein: for I, saith the Lord, will be unto her a wall of fire round about, and will be the glory in the midst of her." Zechariah 2:1-5.

God had commanded that Jerusalem be rebuilt; the vision of the measuring of the city was an assurance that He would give comfort and strength to His afflicted ones, and fulfill to them the promises of His everlasting covenant. His protecting care, He declared, would be like "a wall of fire round about;" and through them His glory would be revealed to all the sons of men. That which He was accomplishing for His people was to be known in all the earth. "Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion: for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee." Isaiah 12:6. {PK 581.3}

Next Mailing: **Prophets and Kings** (1917) Edition Chapter 47 – “Joshua and the Angel.”