

July - September 2020

The Link

NORTH ROAD CHAPEL

BIDEFORD

‘Declaring all the counsel of God’

IMPORTANT NOTICE

God willing, from Lord’s Day 5th July 2020 public services will be resumed in the chapel building, with some health measures in place:

Lord’s Day:

Prayer Meeting 10.30 a.m.
Morning Service 11.00 a.m.
Evening Service 6.30 p.m.

Thursday:

Prayer Meeting 7.30 p.m.
Bible Teaching Ministry 8.00 p.m.

For the benefit of those still confined to their homes, or without regular ministry, a simultaneous online broadcast may be heard at:

www.northroadchapel.org/livestream

Recordings of the services (MP3 or Audio CD) continue to be available for those without internet access, by contacting the addresses below.

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THE LORD'S DAY

Part 16

“Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew My people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins ... And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in. If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on My holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable; and shalt honour Him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.” (Isaiah 58:1, 12-14)

Through several previous articles, an examination has been made of the practical side of Sabbath observance. It is a solemn obligation because it is a sign. Times of public worship are solemn assemblies that demand holy conduct of behaviour; and also serve for identification, when the church gathers as one body, with one heart and one voice. Furthermore, the Scripture gives instruction concerning private and domestic affairs on the Sabbath. It is a holy day which must also be observed within the home. Pleasure, recreation, feasting, pastimes, worldly reading, *“speaking [our] own words”* (Isaiah 58:13) – that is, secular or earthly conversation – are all things to be ‘ceased from’ on the Sabbath. There is instead to be a ‘delighting in the Lord’ (cf Psalm 37:4). Three principal matters emphasised in the Word of God, to be especially commemorated, in private and in public on the holy Sabbath, are:

- 1) Creation – the power and manifested glory of God.
- 2) Redemption – by blood and by power.
- 3) Heaven – the Sabbath is to be a foretaste of that eternal rest which will never end.

PREACHING

Come now to Isaiah 58:1: “*Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew My people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.*” **Preaching** has a place and a very important one in Sabbath activity. In preaching, **doctrine** is the vital ingredient. If a man is not declaring the doctrine of Holy Scripture then let him quit the pulpit! But doctrine for doctrine’s sake is not sufficient; there must also be **application**. A preacher’s work is not just to state the truth, he must also apply that truth and press it home to the consciences of those who listen. The minister of the Word of God is to “*Cry aloud, spare not*”. He must ‘show God’s people their transgressions and the House of Jacob their sins’.

Many preachers are ruthless when speaking to sinners; they will shake them over the pit and so on; but when it comes to believers, they prophesy nothing other than ‘smooth things’. The Bible says that “*judgment must begin at the house of God*” (1 Peter 4:17). The purity, the health, and the holiness of the Church on earth is of prime importance; for in her and through her is truth revealed and God glorified. Therefore, preaching must always penetrate the thin veneer, it must continually be tearing off garments of pretence, exposing hypocrisy and insincerity. Article 2 of North Road Chapel’s Declaration of Practice reads: “The Word of God is to be preached in its entirety, by men gifted of the Holy Spirit so to do, soberly setting forth divine truth, shunning not to declare all the counsel of God, without fear or favour to saint or sinner”. With this background, we proceed to our subject.

In the great matter of preaching, the Law has a vital place; and contained in that Law is **Sabbath observance**. This, then, is part of the message – not only to be stated, but to be applied and pressed home. Critics will be quick to speak of the early New Testament Christians of Asia Minor. ‘How could they observe the Sabbath?’ they retort, ‘they were scattered, they were, in the main, slaves. Some were even dragged along to idol temples by their pagan employers. Persecution hung over their heads

continually, but we do not read of disciplinary action being taken against them by the church. Vast numbers of these slaves were compelled to work seven days a week, but where do you read of Paul or John or Peter rebuking them for not rebelling and demonstrating against their heathen masters and their practices, or organising strike action?’ These historical details notwithstanding, it can be stated very emphatically that these early Christians still strove to keep the Sabbath Day to the utmost of their ability. Acts 20:7 describes Paul preaching to the gathered saints on the first day of the week, in Troas, at midnight. Later still they broke bread, they ate, then they talked a long while even till the break of day (cf Acts 20:11). ‘How could that have been the first day of the week?’ is heard from some sceptics, ‘that was Monday’. How perverse some men are! The undeniable fact stands out in clarity, that here was a company of believers, observing the Creation principle of one day in seven for God; and if they could not observe it from sunrise to sunset, then they would observe it from the time they left their employment at night, until they were due to start again the following morning.

Further proof of this is found in Acts 12. When Peter was arrested and imprisoned, “*prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him*” (v. 5). The story is well-known. All was still, everyone was sleeping. When the angel came into that cell Peter was asleep, chained between two soldiers. He awoke, his chains fell off. “*Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals ... Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me*” (v. 8) said the angel. Down the corridor they walked, past the first ward, past the second ward; no one stirred. They came to the great iron gate, locked and secured, but as they approached it swung open and out into freedom walked Peter! Then the angel left him; Peter was alone. Where should he go? “*And when Peter was come to himself* (he was literally an escaped prisoner) ... *when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying*” (Acts 12:11-12). He came to this assembled company of the Lord’s people, knocked on the door, and Rhoda

answered. It was in the dead of night and they were gathered together. 'Ah! You cannot prove that this was the Sabbath', says someone. No! I am not trying to, but this incident again goes to prove that their meetings often were in the night. The fact that they were slaves did not stop them from public assembling. This is why one does not read words of rebuke in this connection; there was no need, indeed there was nothing to correct. These dear men and women were faithful souls; they set aside their hours for public worship, they had this sanctified day (though it was in the night) and thus they wore the badge of true Christianity.

In the process of time, the gospel spread; circumstances changed in many parts of the world. Heathen temples gave place to companies of true believers, springing up throughout Asia Minor and later in Europe. The holy day of rest superseded the festivals of heathendom. When in the sovereign purposes of God, the Gospel was ultimately brought to these shores, the orgies of the Druids gradually ceased. Brutal and idolatrous customs were cast away; the days of heathen festivals gave place to the Creation institution of one-day-in-seven hallowed for God; on which His truth was preached, His praises sung and the mysteries of His death celebrated. This is ever the accompaniment of true Christianity. The Sabbath is the badge – it is the sign.

This is a matter of the utmost importance. How dare any believer devalue this day! The importance of the observance of the Lord's Day is immense. Any act of violation tends to undermine the framework of the faith; every wilful breach tends to further destruction and it infects and influences the entire community. Whereas, good example on the part of an individual, a household and a local church is to fly an ensign of the highest order. It is to act as salt in the world, and witness to God and His Law. It is a preservative to the awful moral corruption. This salt will also sting and smart as it is applied to the gaping wounds of modern society. If the Christian church of today was faithfully flying this standard – lifting up the voice like a trumpet, crying aloud in its declaration of God's holy Law, sparing not the people but pressing it home and

forcefully applying it to them – this land would once again be shaken to its very foundations. How is the church described in Song of Solomon 6:4? “*Terrible as an army with banners*”. A vast marching army going into the attack, her ensigns held aloft, her banners unfurled and billowing in the breeze of Holy Ghost wind, unfolding to men every aspect of Biblical truth as she advances, “*earnestly contend[ing] for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints*” (Jude 1:3).

In conclusion, this matter deserves further reinforcement, for it pertains to God’s holy Law. Truth cannot be trifled with. Men may turn away, they may cavil, they may object. Their very arguments are but an indication of a conscience which cannot be silenced. The undeniable truth is that a weekly day set apart has always existed wherever true Christianity has been known. The Sabbath was instituted before the Fall. The Sabbath is part of God’s Moral Law. The Sabbath was observed by the prophets. The Sabbath was insisted upon by those who returned from Babylonish captivity. The Sabbath was observed by the Lord and His apostles. The Sabbath has been kept in every church, in every age, in every part of the world right down through history. It stands as a monument throughout all time to God and to His truth. In this present age, when walls are broken down and landmarks are removed, heed the word of Isaiah as found in the reading and be true witnesses. “*And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in*” (Isaiah 58:12).

Every true local church needs to be a company who will cry aloud and spare not, lifting up their voice as a trumpet, showing the people their error. These dark and evil days demand such a stand. Despite personal weakness and minority, God is with us, and can make us “*terrible as an army with banners*”. May it be so.

W. H. Molland (1920 – 2012)

CAPTIVITY TURNED

Psalm 126

“When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream” (v. 1). Being in trouble, the gracious pilgrims remember for their comfort times of national woe which were succeeded by remarkable deliverances. Then sorrow was gone like a dream, and the joy which followed was so great that it seemed too good to be true, and they feared that it must be the vision of an idle brain. So sudden and so overwhelming was their joy that they felt like men out of themselves, ecstatic, or in a trance. The captivity had been great, and great was the deliverance; for the great God Himself had wrought it: it seemed too good to be actually true: each man said to himself:

“Is this a dream? O if it be a dream,
Let me sleep on, and do not wake me yet.” (Longfellow)

It was not the freedom of an individual which the Lord in mercy had wrought, but of all Zion, of the whole nation; and this was reason enough for overflowing gladness. We need not instance the histories which illustrate this verse in connection with literal Israel; but it is well to remember how often it has been true to ourselves. Let us look to the prison houses from which we have been set free. Ah, me, what captives we have been! At our first conversion what a turning again of captivity we experienced. Never shall that hour be forgotten. Joy! Joy! Joy! Since then, from multiplied troubles, from depression of spirit, from miserable backsliding, from grievous doubt, we have been emancipated, and we are not able to describe the bliss which followed each emancipation.

“When God revealed His gracious name
And changed our mournful state,
Our rapture seemed a pleasing dream,
The grace appeared so great.” (Watts)

This verse will have a higher fulfilment in the day of the final overthrow of the powers of darkness, when the Lord shall come forth for the salvation and glorification of His redeemed. Then in a fuller sense than even at Pentecost our old men shall see visions, and our young men shall dream dreams: yea, all things shall be so wonderful, so far beyond all expectation, that those who behold them shall ask themselves whether it be not all a dream. The past is ever a sure prognostic of the future; the thing which has been is the thing that shall be: we shall again and again find ourselves amazed at the wonderful goodness of the Lord. Let our hearts gratefully remember the former loving kindnesses of the Lord: we were sadly low, sorely distressed, and completely past hope, but when Jehovah appeared, He did not merely lift us out of despondency, He raised us into wondering happiness. The Lord who alone turns our captivity does nothing by halves: those whom He saves from hell He brings to heaven. He turns exile into ecstasy, and banishment into bliss...

“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” (v. 2-3). They did not deny the statement which reflected so much glory upon Jehovah: with exultation they admitted and repeated the statement of Jehovah’s notable dealings with them. To themselves they appropriated the joyful assertion; they said, *“the Lord hath done great things for us”*, and they declared their gladness at the fact. It is a poor modesty which is ashamed to own its joys in the Lord. Call it rather a robbery of God. There is so little of happiness abroad that if we possess a full share of it, we ought not to hide our light under a bushel, but let it shine on all that are in the house. Let us avow our joy, and the reason of it, stating the *“whereof”* as well as the fact.

None are so happy as those who are newly turned and returned from captivity; none can more promptly and satisfactorily give a reason for the gladness that is in them; the Lord Himself has blessed us, blessed us

greatly, blessed us individually, blessed assuredly; and because of this we sing unto His name...

“*Turn again our captivity, O Lord*” (v. 4). Remembering the former joy of a past rescue they cry to Jehovah for a repetition of it. When we pray for the turning of our captivity, it is wise to recall former instances thereof. Nothing strengthens faith more effectually than the memory of a previous experience. “*The Lord hath done*” harmonises well with the prayer, “*turn again*”. The text shows us how wise it is to resort anew to the Lord, who in former times has been so good to us. Where else should we go but to Him who has done such great things for us? Who can turn again our captivity but He who turned it before? “*As the streams in the south*” (v. 4). Even as the Lord sends floods down on the dry beds of southern torrents after long droughts, so can He fill our wasted and wearied spirits with floods of holy delight. This the Lord can do for any of us, and He can do it at once, for nothing is too hard for the Lord. It is well for us thus to pray, and to bring our suit before Him who is able to bless us ‘exceeding abundantly’. Do not let us forget the past, but in the presence of our present difficulty let us resort unto the Lord, and beseech Him to do that for us which we cannot possibly do for ourselves – that which no other power can perform on our behalf...

“*They that sow in tears shall reap in joy*” (v. 5). Hence, present distress must not be viewed as if it would last for ever; it is not the end, by any means, but only a means to the end. Sorrow is our sowing; rejoicing shall be our reaping. If there were no sowing in tears there would be no reaping in joy. If we were never captives, we could never lead our captivity captive. Our mouth had never been filled with holy laughter if it had not been first filled with the bitterness of grief. We must sow; we may have to sow in the wet weather of sorrow; but we shall reap, and reap in the bright summer season of joy. Let us keep to the work of this present sowing time, and find strength in the promise which is here so positively given us. Here is one of the Lord’s ‘shalls’ and ‘wills’; it is freely given both to workers, waiters, and weepers; and they may rest

assured that it will not fail: 'in due season they shall reap' (cf Galatians 6:9). This sentence may well pass current in the church as an inspired proverb. It is not every sowing which is thus insured against all danger, and guaranteed a harvest; but the promise specially belongs to sowing in tears. When a man's heart is so stirred that he weeps over the sins of others, he is elect to usefulness. Winners of souls are first weepers for souls. As there is no birth without travail, so is there no spiritual harvest without painful tillage. When our own hearts are broken with grief at man's transgression, we shall break other men's hearts: tears of earnestness beget tears of repentance: 'deep calleth unto deep' (cf Psalm 42:7)

"*He...*" (v. 6). The general assurance is applied to each one in particular. That which is spoken in the previous verse in the plural, "*they*", is here repeated in the singular: "*he*". "***He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him***". He leaves his couch to go forth into the frosty air and tread the heavy soil; and as he goes he weeps because of past failures, or because the ground is so sterile, or the weather so unseasonable, or his corn so scarce, and his enemies so plentiful and so eager to rob him of his reward. He drops a seed and a tear, a seed and a tear, and so goes on his way. In his basket he has seed which is precious to him, for he has little of it, and it is his hope for the next year. Each grain leaves his hand with anxious prayer that it may not be lost: he thinks little of himself, but much of his seed, and he eagerly asks, 'Will it prosper? Shall I receive a reward for my labour?' Yes, good husbandman, doubtless you will gather sheaves from your sowing. Because the Lord has written doubtless, take heed that you do not doubt. No reason for doubt can remain after the Lord has spoken. You will return to this field – not to sow, but to reap; not to weep, but to rejoice; and after a while you will go home again with nimbler step than today, though with a heavier load, for you shall have sheaves to bear with you. Your handful shall be so greatly multiplied that many sheaves shall spring from it; and you shall

have the pleasure of reaping them and bringing them home to the place from which you went out weeping.

This is a figurative description of that which was literally described in the first three verses. It is the turning of the worker's captivity, when, instead of seed buried beneath black earth, he sees the waving crops inviting him to a golden harvest. It is somewhat singular to find this promise of fruitfulness in close contact with return from captivity; and yet it is so in our own experience, for when our own soul is revived, the souls of others are blessed by our labours. If any of us, having been once lonesome and lingering captives, have now returned home, and have become longing and labouring sowers, may the Lord, who has already delivered us, soon transform us into glad-hearted reapers, and to Him shall be the praise for ever and ever.

C. H. Spurgeon (1834 – 1892)

“My God, I would not coldly offer Thee
The withered hue of feeling's flower,
The fragment of the passing hour –
Gifts which have nothing cost to me.
But, looking down into my heart,
Whatever treasure it has hidden deep,
Whatever talent it would strive to keep,
With these, to Thee, O God, I part.
I should not dare to bring affections blighted
By the rude blasts of worldliness and pride,
Nor lay a worn-out heart the earth had slighted
Upon the altar of the Crucified.
But in life's dewy hours, when hope is on the wing,
My love, myself, my all, to Thee I bring.”

Anon.

WHEREIN SHALL WE RETURN?

“If thou wilt return, O Israel, saith the Lord, return unto Me”
(Jeremiah 4:1)

A little over three months ago, when preparing the previous edition of this magazine, it was necessary to remark upon the cessation of public worship services, and the dramatically altered circumstances facing much of the world’s population. In the mercies of God, after 16 weeks of such restrictions in the UK, a restoration of corporate gatherings is now anticipated. As this happens, it should be the practice of every true Christian to make a close self-examination (cf 2 Corinthians 13:5), and ask, ‘what will be the nature of my return?’

Every discerning believer must conclude that the judgments of God have been manifested in the events of 2020. And, since there have been serious repercussions for local churches too, it is evident that an element of divine chastening is also involved, toward the people of God. Whilst upon the earth there is great ‘distress of nations, with perplexity’ (cf Luke 21:25), it behoves the Christian to direct a penitential cry toward heaven, in these terms: **“I am listening, Lord for Thee. What hast Thou to say to **me**?”** It is essential to know what lessons the Lord would teach us each, personally, by these profound circumstances; and to learn them swiftly. Then, when a reprieve or return is granted, to demonstrate the sanctifying influence of those trials, in lives yet more God-honouring.

It would be a tragedy after Divine Providence has called so abrupt and prolonged a halt to former ways of life; when God has forcibly interrupted the pursuit of worldliness and limited the means of sin; if those thus affected remained unreprieved – not moved to repentance, nor in any way sanctified. However, Biblical history furnishes a sad case of precisely this failure. After a thousand years of God’s long-suffering and clemency, the Jews finally experienced the threatened punishment

spoken of in the Law, and warned by generations of prophets. The land was invaded by foes, Jerusalem conquered, the temple razed, and they were carried away into captivity in Babylon. Even this most serious judgment was limited in duration: “*For 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*” (Jeremiah 29:10). It would be wonderful to report that this severe imposition of the hand of God had a remedial effect, and wrought a transformation within the people. Sadly, the record of the ‘post Exile’ Scriptures (Ezra, Nehemiah, Zechariah, Haggai and Malachi) tells a very different story. It shows the Jews retuning in a geographical and practical sense, but not in a moral or spiritual way. They returned to their homes, they returned, alas, to their old ways, but they did not return unto the Lord.

A consideration of this period in history serves as a cautionary lesson, and a negative example in behaviour to be avoided. Christians in the present day, returning from their relatively brief period of ‘exile’ and absence, should learn to “*labour . . . lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief*” (Hebrews 4:11). Some of the errors of those Old Testament people are described:

1.) Murmuring at Providence

“*And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord . . . they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord . . . But 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; and 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*” (Ezra 3:10-13). The repatriation of the Jews occurred over an extended period of time, under the guidance of a few godly men. Those who first returned with Ezra the scribe were engaged in rebuilding an altar, and then laying the foundations for a new temple structure.

This reconstruction effort provoked a surprisingly mixed reception. The older generation – persons well in excess of 70 years old, who remembered Solomon’s temple – were loud in their complaints about the smallness of the new building. The Bible describes nothing of its appearance or dimensions, but the difference must have been immediately visible.

Very often, in the purposes of God, times of trial and adversity have the effect of reducing the Lord’s people – at least, outwardly. This is attested by Biblical and subsequent history. On such occasions, ‘many disciples go back, and walk no more with the Lord’ (cf John 6:66). After seasons of hardship, conflict, national emergency, schism or secession, those that remain are merely a ‘remnant’ of what existed before. Those in a position to compare the ‘before’ and ‘after’ conditions may do so adversely, and like the men of Ezra’s day, express their displeasure in no uncertain terms. Perhaps today, returning congregations will find themselves reduced in number, subjected to all kinds of restrictions and limitations, unable to worship as once they did, and regard their latter state to be worse than the former. Is such an attitude justified? Is it right?

Solomon, in the divinely-imparted wisdom given to him, states a general principle: *“Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not enquire wisely concerning this”* (Ecclesiastes 7:10). To the post-Exile Jews, the prophet Haggai was sent with a more direct message: *“Who is left among you that saw this house in her first glory? and how do ye see it now? is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing? Yet now be strong . . . all ye people of the land, saith the Lord, and work: for I am with you, saith the Lord of Hosts: According to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remaineth among you: fear ye not. For thus saith the Lord of Hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill*

this house with glory, saith the Lord of Hosts. The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine, saith the Lord of Hosts. The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of Hosts: and in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of Hosts” (Haggai 2:3-9).

The people were not to ‘judge the Lord by feeble sense’, much less to ‘murmur at His wise decrees’. The presence of the Holy Spirit was not dependent upon the size of a building. The glory of the Lord was not conditional upon the scale of the work. Spiritual realities cannot be measured in terms of physical dimensions. Also, who were these Jews to complain at God’s sovereign purposes, and complain against heaven? There was no accident about their situation; they were not the victims of circumstance; their difficulties were not the unavoidable consequence of seven decades in exile. No, they were the subjects of Divine providence, and everything about the situation was appointed by God. Look at the expressions used by the prophet Haggai: He is the Lord of **Hosts**, who, should He so wish, could fill a place with thousands of His people. He is Lord of the **silver and gold**, who could, if He desire, bestow wealth and riches in abundance, and a temple greater than Solomon’s. These things are entirely at His prerogative, and it would help every enfeebled church, every embattled saint, to remember it!

Seasons of affliction and crisis are times of ‘shaking’, in which temporal and material blessings – buildings, numbers, church activities, religious routines – might be lost. There may, in the purposes of God, be a “*removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain*”. Those things that are genuine, spiritual, eternal, and cannot be harmed by external circumstances, are the things that ultimately endure. To which the Apostle adds: “*Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear*” (Hebrews 12:27-28).

2.) Misplaced Priorities

As the books of Ezra and Haggai are read and compared, a troubling timeline of events begins to appear. The proclamation of Cyrus by which the Jews were to depart for their native country was issued in the first year of his reign (cf Ezra 1:1). By the seventh month of that year, there were returnees offering sacrifices upon a renewed altar (cf Ezra 3:1, 6). Work upon the temple itself commenced in the second month of the following year (cf Ezra 3:8). Then their progress ground to a halt. A change in monarch, and approximately 16 years later, Haggai was sent to reprove the people for their slackness, and direct them to resume building (cf Haggai 1:1). If the interference of adversaries and official sanctions had been the only reason (cf Ezra 4, 5) the delay might have been excusable. But something more was at stake: *“Thus speaketh the Lord of Hosts, saying, This people say, The time is not come, the time that the Lord’s house should be built. Then came the word of the Lord by Haggai the prophet, saying, 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”* (Haggai 1:2-5).

Jerusalem was a derelict and ruined city, which had lain abandoned for seventy years. It could have offered little in the way of shelter or home comforts for the returning exiles. Alongside the labours on the altar and the temple, they needed also to build houses to dwell in. From the solemn language of the prophet, it is evident which had been receiving the people’s primary attention. Quite apart from providing for their basic needs, they had begun an extensive programme of ‘home improvements’, beautifying their properties, even to panelling them with expensive woodwork (the sense of the word ‘ceiled’). They were also focussed on reviving the agricultural economy, and were rapidly becoming a consumerist society. Yet inexplicably to them, as much time, money and effort as they expended on these enterprises, still they were attended with little success. Harvests were poor. Trade was bad. *“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. Thus saith the Lord of Hosts; Consider your ways. Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the Lord. 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” (Haggai 1: 6-9).

The fundamental problem was one of misplaced priorities. The Lord had turned the captivity of the people, but they were using their new-found freedom primarily for their own benefit, and the pursuit of worldly ends. Homes and harvests, work and wages, are not evil; all have their rightful place; but that is not a place of precedence over the things of God. At the present time, as restrictions are lifted for many people in the world, there is a universal clamour for shops and businesses to reopen, markets to be incentivised, jobs to be created, services to be restored, pleasures and pastimes to be reinstated. It is to be feared that many Christians are at risk of being ‘led away with the error of the wicked’. How many are concerned more about their homes, gardens, families and holidays, than with their Christian duty, service for God, empty Chapels, and the household of faith?

Surely it is only reasonable that when God appoints His judgments, and metes them out; then mercifully concludes those judgments and grants restoration; thereafter to give first attention unto Him, and wait upon the Lord? Who, already indebted to the Lord for His grace, would squander His goodness upon material things? Much less to expect success in those matters? God counsels thus by His prophet: *“Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in Mine house, and prove Me now herewith, saith the Lord of Hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it”* (Malachi 3:10). Or, in New Testament language:

*“Take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. **But seek ye first the kingdom of God,** and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”* (Matthew 6:31-33).

3.) Mixture with the People

Another deficiency of the Jews, which appeared with dreadful rapidity, is bemoaned by Ezra and Nehemiah: *“Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites ... And when I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonied”* (Ezra 9:1, 3). *“In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews’ language, but according to the language of each people. And I contended with them ... Shall we then hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God?”* (Nehemiah 13:23-5, 27).

One can almost feel the holy horror and bitter disappointment of these godly men, witnessing so fast a resumption of the very same iniquities that prompted the Exile in the first place. By means of the captivity, God had directly intervened to stop the ‘ecumenical heathenism’ and polytheism being practised in Judah. The blasphemous combination of Levitical worship and paganism that had polluted the temple for centuries was finally terminated by the temple’s destruction. No sooner were the people returned, than their admixture with the surrounding nations began again. Ezra prays in righteous despair: *“**And after all that is come upon us for our evil deeds, and for our great trespass, seeing that Thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast***

given us such deliverance as this; Should we again break Thy commandments, and join in affinity with the people of these abominations? wouldst not Thou be angry with us till Thou hadst consumed us, so that there should be no remnant nor escaping? O Lord God of Israel, Thou art righteous: for we remain yet escaped, as it is this day: behold, we are before Thee in our trespasses: for we cannot stand before Thee because of this” (Ezra 9:13-15)

The parallels to the present day are too striking than to be ignored. Worldliness is the scourge of the professing church. Modern Christendom is wholly adulterated with the evil world. Countless persons going by the name of ‘Christian’ indulge in all the same excesses and ‘abominations’ of the unbelieving masses. There is no line of demarcation, not the slightest degree of separation, *“they have put no difference between the holy and profane, neither have they shewed difference between the unclean and the clean”* (Ezekiel 22:26). In fact, the mainstream church is so ‘wedded’ to the world, that its vocabulary and speech has completely changed. The 21st Century ‘believer’ hardly recognises Scripture; he ‘cannot speak in the language of Zion, but according to the language of the people’.

Whatever else may have occurred in recent months, this much is clear: it has forced a cessation from the ‘rudiments of the world’ – its pleasure-houses, entertainment venues, sports fixtures, eateries, drinking dens, centres of trade and commerce, have all been closed – as much to wayward Christians as to unbelievers. Simultaneously, the closure of places of worship has resulted in the shutting-down of many places not worthy of the name: the errors of Rome, the empty charade of Anglicanism, the profane excesses of Charismania. Having been brought to a halt, good if they were never to be resumed. There has rarely been so plain a directive, so opportune a moment, for separation from the world: *“And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues”* (Revelation 18:4).

Conclusion

For several months, church-going Christians have been awaiting authorisation from national governments to return to their buildings. But an infinitely higher instruction has been given: “*Return unto Me, and I will return unto you, saith the Lord of Hosts*” (Malachi 3:7). This has nothing to do with venue or location – it was spoken to the former exiles by then situated in Jerusalem. The return called for was one of a moral and spiritual nature. This has nothing to do with the mere outward motions of religion – these were found in abundance in the land. The summons was to greater obedience, godliness and zeal.

The exhortation to a repentant return can be heeded at any time, and in any place. It does not need to await the reopening of Chapel buildings, or a restoration of a materialistic ‘normality’. Contrite Christians in parts of the world still subject to restrictions are as much able to heed this call as those enjoying restored freedoms. In fact, it might be argued that repentance was timelier and more genuine, if it came while the chastening hand of God was still outstretched; rather than to idly wait for an abatement. The order described in the Epistle is plain: “*Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you*” (James 4:8).

The prophet Joel lived at a different time, the national crisis of his day was different – a plague of locusts. But the reason for its appointment, and the Lord’s design in sending it were the same. Scripture speaks with a consistent voice: “*Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth Him of the evil. Who knoweth if He will return and repent, **and leave a blessing behind Him***” (Joel 2:12-14). If this were the gracious outcome of the past months of adversity, the purposes of God would be clearly vindicated, and the experience amply repaid.

R. J. Steward.

EDITORIAL

In last quarter's editorial, reference was made to the incident of the man born blind, described in John 9. It serves to prove an important point: in cases of tragedy, affliction or illness, whether personal or collective, none should dare to assume the direct punishment of particular sin, or immediate visitation of a certain error. "*Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him*" (John 9:3). These matters belong to the secret purposes of God, who works all things according to the counsel of His own will. It pertains to **Divine sovereignty**.

However, a vital, balancing doctrine needs also to be stressed. In an earlier episode narrated by John, the Lord heals a life-long invalid at the pool of Bethesda, to whom He afterwards gives a solemn warning: "*Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee*" (John 5:14). Precisely what the transgressions were, of which this man was guilty, and exactly the connection between his sins and the things that he suffered, are known to none save the Lord. Nevertheless, this cautionary note was evidently needful. And it continues to be so today.

In the Lord's mercies, in many parts of the world, the initial impacts of the pandemic are receding. Case numbers are falling, recovery rates improving, and restrictions lifting. Individuals whose lives were very seriously affected for a time, are now 'taking up' their former habits, and 'walking' abroad once more. To whom the Lord says by His Word: "*sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee*". This pertains to **human responsibility**.

There is an application to be made to the **people of God**, who have all proved something of Divine chastening in recent months. The Lord has many ways whereby to reprove, correct, and instruct in righteousness. Sometimes by the sweet influence and gracious leadings of His Spirit;

sometimes by the application of His Word and truth; and sometimes by the more austere hand of changed circumstances – it may be of a vexatious or troubling kind. Every believer can testify to what extent the ‘lockdown’ has acted as an impediment to sin, or a preventative to worldliness in their own lives. It would be sadly remiss of any Christian to fail to heed the Lord’s sharpest lessons and loudest reproofs. To continue in sin after such a season is indicative either of insensitivity, ignorance, obstinacy, or wilful disobedience. To continue in sin is to invite a repeating of the lesson – perhaps in terms even more severe. The sad history of God’s people in the time of the Judges shows how many times chastisement may need to be reiterated.

There is an application to be made also to **the world**. All around, unbelieving men and women crave a return to the ‘pleasures of sin’, with even greater abandon and determination than before; as though to make up for lost time; as ‘debtors to the flesh to live after the flesh’ (cf Romans 8:12). God’s merciful revocation of the plague is not a token of Divine approbation, or ignorance, or licence on His part. *“For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is stretched out still”* (Isaiah 9:12). The Lord is not slack concerning His promised judgments, but grants one further window of opportunity for repentance (cf 2 Peter 3:9). No better message to the world could be given at the present time, than this: ***“sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee”***. There are worse things than viruses to be faced in this life, and far worse things in the life to come, for the unrepentant sinner. *“Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear Him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell”* (Matthew 10:28). How many are there, rejoicing in deliverance from a virus of the body, who have not sought deliverance from the far more serious and terminal ‘virus of the soul’, which is, sin?

God grant that such a witness might be given by His churches in our day, and cause these dark providences to be turned to the salvation of many.