Esther 10:3 (John Gifford Bellett) 57328

Strength From God: Meditations for Our Time From Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, Esther 10:3: Conclusion (10:3)

Having read the books of Ezra and Nehemiah by themselves as the story of the returned captives, and the book of Esther by itself as the story of the dispersed captives, we would now meditate on them together for a few moments. They give us, as we see, two distinct companies of captives, or two sections of the Jews. They illustrate different parts of the divine counsel and wisdom touching that people; and teach us very important lessons for our souls to learn thoroughly.

In each of these scenes, in the midst of each of these sections of the people of God, we have, so to speak, a separate platform erected for the exhibition of several or separate portions of God's ways and dealings with them.

The Returned Captives

The returned captives are brought home and left in the land in order that they may be tested again, for to test His people, though in different ways, had been God's way from the beginning. Israel had already been tested by the gift of power. They had received a fat and good land, and been led on as from strength to strength, till they had flourished into a kingdom: a kingdom which had drawn the eyes of the kings of the earth and was the admiration of the world.

But they had been untrue to their stewardship. They had abused the power entrusted to them and were rebellious against the supreme rights of Him who had thus set them up, and ordained them as chief and metropolitan in the earth. And accordingly, or consequently, power, supremacy in the earth, or principal authority among the nations, was taken from them and given to the Gentiles.

Now, however, they are at home again. The captivity to which their unfaithfulness had led is over, and there is a section of the people at home in the land of their fathers again. For it is the divine purpose to test them by another test. God is about to send the Messiah to them. His mission and ministry is to be in healing mercy, a proposal of the grace that brings salvation, that it may be known whether they have an answer to the appeals of love, since they have already proved that they had no fidelity to Him who had entrusted them with power.

This is what we read in the fact of Israel's (or Judah's) return from Babylon. They are Jews again in their own land. Accordingly, as soon as they get home again, they behave like Jews. They keep the ordinances—they raise the national altar—they rebuild the temple—they keep themselves apart from the heathen—they read the Scriptures—they observe the way of the God of Israel, as far as subjection to power in the hand of the Gentile will admit it. The God of Israel owns them and He blesses them and He shelters them. He may exercise them in faith and patience, but still He is with them. As of old, He gives them leaders and deliverers and teachers: sends to them His prophets, grants them days of revival—days of the new moon in the seventh month.

We know all this, indeed. This was a kind of reformation in their religious history. No idolatry is practiced by them after this. But other corruptions rapidly set in and worked, as not only the books of Ezra and Nehemiah themselves show us, but more particularly the prophecy of Malachi. And the opening of the New Testament scriptures confirms this, for the gospel by Matthew lets us see clearly and fully that the returned captives were deeply unbelieving: as untrue to the doctrines and proposals of goodness as their fathers had been to the stewardship of power. "He came to His own, and His own received Him not." (Here let me suggest what I believe to be so, but would not teach it with authority: that among the witnesses of goodness which God left among the returned captives, and which were so many harbingers or pledges of a Messiah coming in grace, the Pool of Bethesda takes place. It was, indeed, an extraordinary witness of "God the Healer.")

Grace to the Whole World

Indeed, this is so. When Israel had been untrue to the power given to them from God, power was given over to the Gentiles. So now, since they are untrue to grace, grace is given over to the whole world. For the gospel is preached and the salvation of God is held up in the eyes of the ends of the earth. And strikingly consistent and beautiful is this progress in the ways of divine wisdom, or of God's dispensations. All testing ends in failure, and God must act for us and not with us. This fresh trial, by the ministry of Messiah, only proves, as by the mouth of another witness, that man is incorrigible and incurable. Every effort to make something of him, or to do something with him, leads him but to another exposure of himself, till he is left naked to his shame. The kingdom is not entered by a tested creature, even though grace tested him. Judgment as of "reprobate silver" is the result of the process. "The bellows are burnt, the lead is consumed of the fire, the founder melteth in vain."

Yes, indeed, he must be saved by grace, and not merely tested by it. The first advent of Messiah, or the proposal of salvation, did not lead Israel into the kingdom: it has left them a judged people, scattered and peeled, unsaved and unblest—condemned upon a fuller conviction than ever.

The Dispersed People

We turn, however, to another scene. We are to consider another section of the people: the dispersed and not the returned. For in them is erected another platform, as I may still speak, for the illustration of God's way. We shall see them as the pledges and witnesses, not of a tested, but of a saved people—saved through sovereign grace and led into the kingdom.

This people had not availed themselves of the opportunity they had to return home. This is a standing witness against them. They remained among the uncircumcised. They acted the part of the raven in Noah's ark. They seemed to take up with the unclean world. They are as Gentiles, we may say; we see no feasts or ordinances, or Word of God among them. But I grant they are Jews still. And grace abounds towards them. In the midst of the Gentiles they are still kept alive—another unconsumed burning bush. Jehovah is not seen to acknowledge them, as He acknowledged their brethren who had returned to Jerusalem. Still He had His eye upon them, and they are kept alive; and that, too, until the due time comes for His rising up to deal with them in a way of which all His prophets have spoken.

All this we see in Esther, that wondrous book which closes the historic volume of the Old Testament.

A remnant is seen there. God deals with them marvelously both by His hand and Spirit; but He is unmanifested. We saw this when meditating on Esther. And we further traced God's way with Israel in all those eras of their history when they were in an informal, anomalous state: as instanced in the marriage of Joseph with an Egyptian, of Moses with a daughter of Midian, and the like, and Esther's marriage with Ahasuerus the Persian. For this was as the way of God Himself with them when they were untrue to Him, He went over to others. Power first, as we have seen, and now grace and salvation have gone over to others, since Israel was disobedient and unwilling. How consistent all this is! What constancy and perfection and unity there is in the ways of His holy wisdom! Joseph's brethren were untrue to him and cast him out. He married and became important in Egypt. Moses' brethren were untrue to him and forced him away; he married and became happy in Midian. Jehovah's people were untrue to Him, and He gave power to the Gentiles. His own were untrue to the Messiah, rejecting, not receiving Him; and He now dispenses grace and salvation to the whole world.

Surely the Lord knows the end from the beginning. Surely His way is before Him.

Oh for grace to say this and to do it! and to walk with Him, too, along the path of His wisdom and the ways of His dispensations. From glory to glory, to "walk in the light as He is in the light."

And fresh wonders still show themselves to us on these two platforms: in the story of the returned, and in the story of the dispersed.

As I have already observed, Malachi begins to intimate what will be the end of the returned or tested captives. All will fail, as all has failed. The New Testament Scriptures affirm the intimation of Malachi. The Evangelists make good the hints and notices of the prophets. But Esther gives us to know what will be the dispersion, or of that portion which remained among the Gentiles. They will finally be taken up in sovereign grace, carried through "the great tribulation," and by that road into the kingdom. In that story, or on that platform, we see the nation of the Jews brought to the eve and the brink of utter destruction, rescued by the wonder-working hand of God, and then seated in the high places of honor, of influence, and of authority by the Power that rules the earth—all their enemies either judged and taken out of the way, or seeking their favor and blessing. (The great tribulation, "the time of Jacob's trouble," of which the prophets speak, will find the Jews at home in their own land, though now they are dispersed as in the day of Esther. But that is no matter. As a nation they are to pass into the kingdom through the tribulation.)

Man Exposed and God Displayed

In these books, or in these two scenes of various action, are the secrets in which we are instructed. Man is tested and fails; the sinner is taken up in grace and saved.

And these are the secrets we have been set down to learn from the beginning; and we are destined, blessedly destined, to celebrate them forever. Man is exposed—God is displayed. Man is thoroughly made naked to his shame—God is exalted in the highest order of exaltation and displayed in the brightest light of glory. It was thus in the story of Adam at the very beginning. He was tested, and under the testing he failed and destroyed himself. He was then taken up in grace, and saved through the death and resurrection of Christ—by faith in the bruised and bruising Seed of the woman.

It was thus again in Israel. Israel was set under law, but the shadows of good things to come accompanied the law. Under their own covenant, under the law, Israel, like Adam, was ruined. But God acts in the midst of the self-destroyed people, of the self-wrought ruin; and by ordinances and prophecies and pledges of many kinds He has ever been telling them of final grace and salvation.

And now, in like manner, the gospel thoroughly exposes us, but fully, presently, perfectly, eternally saves us. And through the ages of glory, it will be told out that we are a washed people, a ransomed people, who owe everything to grace and redemption, though glorified forever.

These two platforms: the scene in the midst of the returned captives, and the scene in the midst of the dispersed captives, are in company with all the divine way from the beginning, and with that which is to be had in remembrance and celebrated forever. Only we marvel afresh at this new witness of the way of God, His necessary, perfect way in a world like this.

The Lord's Way

How complete all this makes the divine, historic volume of the Old Testament! That volume ends here; and we are well satisfied to have it so.

The way of the Lord Himself in this book is especially wonderful. Apparently He is neglectful of His people. He is "silent" towards them. He does not show Himself, and there is no miracle. His people, even in all the exercises of their hearts under the most pressing circumstances, never mention Him.

Surely this is wonderful. But it is admirable as well as wonderful. It is perfect in its place and season. For during this present Gentile age, God is apart from Israel, like Joseph in Egypt and Moses in Midian were apart from their brethren, as I have already noticed—as many voices of the prophets have anticipated. (See Psa. 74; Isa. 8:17; Isa. 18:4, Isa. 45:15; Hos. 5:15; and so forth.) And the Lord Jesus, speaking as the God of Israel at the close of His ministry, says to them: "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see Me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord" (Matt. 23: 38-39).

But He cares for them. Their names are in the palms of His hands. He revokes not the judgment; but He will, in due time, awake for their deliverance. It is Jesus asleep in the boat, winds and waves tossing it. But in the needed time He awoke and rose for the quieting of all that which, swelling in its anguish, was raging against them.

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