

Ezekiel 11:16 (Frederick W. Lavington) 123059

A Little Sanctuary, I Will Be Unto Them As a Little Sanctuary.

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IN days of confusion and failure the Lord ever recalls the hearts of His saints to first principles: " That which was from the beginning " is the resource of faith, because God's foundation stands sure. The very precious word above quoted was God's promise to the faithful, when, for their sin and apostasy to idolatry, His glory departed, and Ichabod was written upon Israel. Yet, as from the beginning of their history He had said, " Let them make Me a Sanctuary, that I may dwell among them," in His governmental chastisement He remembers mercy, and to those scattered and peeled, where faith was in exercise, He promises that Himself, Whom the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain, would come down in infinite grace to their littleness and nothingness, and be " little " with them—but as a Sanctuary: that the remnant, owning all their sin, and that of their people Israel, might know what was God's joy and God's thought from the beginning, to dwell " in the midst " of a redeemed people. (Num. 5:3; Zeph. 3:15, 17; Zech. 2:5, 10.)

When Christ came, at the time of their confederacy with the Roman power (" we have no king but Caesar," is their shameful boast—John 19:15), He was to be according to His prophet (Isa. 8:14) " a Sanctuary " for faith, but " a Stone of stumbling " to both the houses of Israel, because of their unbelief. Accordingly we find Him speaking of the " Temple of His body," when He cleanses the earthly House, and shows that He will by His death and resurrection rear an enduring House for God's glory. But in His own sinless body all the fullness of the Godhead found its pleasure in dwelling, for in Him "God has been manifested in the flesh " (1 Tim 3:16). Yea, as the only begotten Son, dwelling ever in the bosom of the Father, He has declared or revealed God to us, and this as the Father (John 1:18).

If we remember these blessed facts, they will throw a very precious light on a Scripture, to which God has been pleased to give power in our souls in these last days. I refer to Matt. 18:20: "Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them." The immediate connection of this word in the chapter is the important subject of prayer: and prayer especially regarding the affairs of the Assembly, and what would arise in its history in the Lord's absence. The 16th chapter gives us the revelation of the Assembly by the Lord Himself, founded on the Person of Christ, the Son of the living God, and this as dying and rising again. The 17th chapter shows us the Person of Christ, to Whom all things in heaven and earth are committed, whether it be His saints in the body, or out of the body, or if it be the power of Satan, or dominion over the works of God's hands, as the fish of the sea. Henceforth " Me and thee " is to describe the nearness and dearness of those brought into relationship with Himself, until the time should come, when the word to Saul of Tarsus, " Why persecutest thou Me? " would prepare the heart of that devoted servant for the revelation to be afterward committed to him, that the coming of the Holy Spirit, on the day of Pentecost, baptized believers into one Body, of which Christ was Head in heaven, and all the saints, sealed with the same Spirit, were members together here on earth.

The 18th chapter unfolds to us the principles of the kingdom, and of the Assembly. We enter by gaining through grace the spirit of little children; in other words are "born again of water (the Word of God) and of the Spirit " (John 3:5). And in this circle of divine life and love we should have such care for one another, that we beware of giving any offense. In this we have the example of Christ Himself, Who went after the erring sheep that were lost. The mind that was in Christ Jesus should also be in us, as to our brethren. If a brother does us a wrong, we should not wait for him to repent and own it, but go after him, with the heart of Christ; not thinking of ourselves and of our injury, but of our brother; for the fact of his doing this wrong shows that he has lost touch and communion with his Lord and Savior, and is not only bereft of his own true joy, but is in danger of becoming a source of sorrow to others. There is, however, righteousness as well as grace, and, if he neglects to hear us, still with the same desire to win our brother, we should acquaint the saints, the Assembly, with the facts, that in the circle of divine love the wrong maybe felt, to the Lord, and His saint. Then, taking one or two with us we seek to exercise our brother's conscience, in grace seeking to take the place presented to us by the Lord Jesus Himself, personally and as an example for us (John 13:14-15). To do this we have to get down with the water of the word in true humility of heart, girded as servants, for what have we that we have not received? Sometimes we forget to get down on our knees, thinking we can stand in our own strength; sometimes we forget the water of the word, and think that human reasoning and persuasion will suffice; often we neglect to gird up the loins of our mind, and are not wearing the towel or girdle of truth. We cannot present the truth in power to others, unless we have first applied it to ourselves, and are as it were wearing it, having it dwelling in our hearts. All this is to be with a view to his restoration.

If, however, this be refused, then the offender is to be, if he will not hear the Assembly, as one with whom we cannot walk, "as a heathen man, or a publican." "From such turn away." But is it to be in cold neglect like the world? Do we exercise a certain amount of divine love, and then relinquish the desire to restore our brother? Nay. Divine love is still active, and expresses itself in prayer. Having failed in our dealing face to face with our brother, we take up the conflict face to face with God. The way in which the Lord expresses the truth here is very remarkable. The man is to be "to thee" as one with whom you cannot enjoy the fellowship of God's things. It does not contemplate in this place (for it is a matter of personal trespass) that the man should be put away. There is competency given to the Assembly to act thus, when occasion requires it. But the whole tenor of the passage teaches that divine love, which ever seeks the restoration of the wanderer, must form the affections and ways of the saints, so that ready and hearty forgiveness at all times, and without limit flows forth to the erring but repentant one. So too the very intervention of the Assembly—even in binding and loosing—must be towards the same blessed end—to bring back the offender. It is precious thus to consider the end of the Assembly's action is the " binding " of the trespass on the conscience of the brother by prayer, that he may be " loosed " from a condition of lack of fellowship with his brethren, and eventually " gained." So, if two shall agree, as a matter of prayer, to engage their hearts before God as to a case, "it shall be done for them of My Father." What a gracious encouragement for us to lay to heart this important subject.

The reason is given in verse 20. The Father in heaven responds not only to the prayers of the saints, individually or together, as being the fruit of the Spirit, but we have also the gracious and all-prevailing intercession of Christ. This is, of course, not alluded to in this verse, but it is beautifully brought out elsewhere (Rom. 8:26-27 and 34; Heb. 7:25). Yes! He is our "Sanctuary." He deigns to promise His presence to the smallest number that is possible for fellowship, but, in adding the words "or three " He shows His heart for the restoration of an offender. If there were two only, and one offended, how take another " with thee," so that " in the mouth of two.... witnesses the word may be established." Our blessed Master thought beforehand of a day of small things, and would assure us that His grace is sufficient for such a day. This, beloved, is our " Little Sanctuary," but, in order that the place may be known in divine power by our souls, it is needful to understand the force of the words " are gathered."

There is a power that gathers to Christ even as there is a power that quickens the dead soul. It is the power of the Holy Spirit (John 6:63). And "by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body " (1 Cor. 12:13). The Spirit witnesses to the Person and work of Christ for the salvation of the soul. To those so believing the Holy Spirit of promise is the Seal (Eph. 1). At Pentecost such were gathered to the Name of Christ, to that which expressed His Person as Holy and True, and, as met together, they acknowledged His presence (Acts 2.). Therefore a mere agreement to come together on any other ground does not give the sense of this wondrous privilege.

If anyone were commanded to appear at the Court of His Majesty the King of England, he would take care that in his dress and deportment he did honor to that presence. And, if this be the case in respect to the presence of an earthly monarch, how much more so, when we have to meet the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords; yet the One, who in infinite grace deigns to vouchsafe His presence to His redeemed ones? "When, therefore, the Spirit gathers us to Christ's Name, and His word is active in our souls, the fact is manifested by the "fruits of the Spirit " being produced (Gal. 5:22). But, if in the coming together of God's people, there is shown to be contention and strife, and the works of the flesh, it is clear that the hearts of the saints cannot be in the enjoyment of His presence and of His word, and there would appear grave reason to doubt, if the Lord is indeed present in the manner described and promised. "He that hath My commandments, and doeth them, he it is that loveth Me: and he that loveth Me shall be loved of My Father, and I will love him, and manifest Myself to him " (John 14:21). Here as to the individual, the manifestation of the presence of Christ is to the soul walking in obedience, and we do well to lay this principle to heart, as to His word to us collectively.

Where, however, His word is not abiding in us, we drop down to the level of the world, and "walk as men." Then, as at Corinth, the spirit of party is apt to develop, because the soul that is not occupied with Christ by the Spirit, is soon occupied by Satan with himself. The effort then is to make self the center, instead of Christ, and to draw disciples after self as the Apostle Paul warns the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:30). This is the spirit of heresy or drawing away, which leads to sects or divisions, and of those who cause such we are told in Rom. 16:17, "avoid them." This is the personal action of a soul, walking with God, who has discernment from Him to detect what is contrary to the gathering power of the Spirit. (See also Titus 3:10) When this spirit of division is present in a gathering of God's people, the Spirit of God is quenched, and then the Lord sometimes allows there to be shown what we are apart from "abiding in Him." Then arise contention and strife, lack of brotherly love, and every kind of evil work of the enemy. In this connection James 3 comes to us with a very clear voice. May we lay it to heart, and see to it that it is the wisdom from above that occupies our souls in our walk with our brethren. This wisdom is shown clearly in Matt. 5:24, where the soul in the Sanctuary is touched by the thought that his brother has aught against him, and is to be reconciled before offering his gift.

May the gracious Lord recall us to the simplicity of the truth, to " that which was from the beginning," so that we may be walking in the power of it for ourselves, and quick to discern that which is of the flesh, and therefore contrary to it. And may it lead us to judge ourselves, when such things, alas! are manifested in that which names the Name of Christ. May it humble us, under the mighty hand of God, and may we own the sin, as if we ourselves had brought it in. Then we shall know His recovering grace, and that " lowliness and meekness, forbearing one another in love," and that " fruit of righteousness, which is sown in peace." May God our Father, and the Lord Himself bless His people, and teach them the great grace of preserving to us " a little Sanctuary. "

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