

GUIDANCE IN A DAY OF RUIN

examples from the lives of
Rehoboam • Jeremiah • Daniel

The Old Prophet of Bethel
1 Kings 13:1-32; 2 Kings 23:17,18

by
Hamilton Smith

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Introduction

GUIDANCE IN A DAY OF RUIN

WE may be assured there will never come a day in the history of the Church on earth, however dark and difficult, when there will be no light in God's Word to guide the believer who desires to walk in the path of obedience. Through ignorance or self-will we may miss the path, through lack of devotedness we may be indifferent to it, for want of faith we may shrink from it, but none the less light for the path is there for those who seek it and desire to walk in obedience to the Word.

Moreover this light will not only be found in the New Testament in the form of instruction, but will also be found in the Old Testament by way of illustration. We purpose therefore to look at three Old Testament scenes that will help us to seize the great unchanging principles of God that should guide us in the day of division and scattering among the people of God.

1. REHOBAM

2 Chronicles 11

Until the days of Rehoboam the people of Israel had been united in one kingdom; with the commencement of his reign they were divided. Does the story of this division afford any light as to the terrible divisions that have scattered the people of God in our day? We believe it does.

First we may enquire, What was the root of this division? The actual division took place in the days of Rehoboam but to discover its root we must go back to the days of Solomon. So with every division among the people of God, the true cause is often far removed from the actual division. The tenth chapter of the First Book of Kings, verses 26 to 29, together with chapter eleven, will bring before us the root of this great division in Israel. All is traced back to loss of devotedness to God, and departure from the Word of God. In order to seize the true character of this failure we must remember that the law of Moses gave very definite instructions for the King. In Deuteronomy 17:14 to 20, the King is warned against worldliness on the one hand, and disobedience to the Word on the other. The king was not to multiply horses; he was not to cause the people to return to Egypt, for the Lord had said, "Ye shall henceforth return no more that way." He was not to multiply wives to himself, nor greatly multiply to himself silver and gold. On the other hand he was to write a copy of the law and "read therein all the days of his life," to learn the fear of the Lord, and to keep all the words of the law.

Turning to the tenth and eleventh chapters of the First Book of Kings we find that in every particular King Solomon breaks down. He multiplies horses, he causes the people to return to Egypt; he multiplies wives to himself, and greatly multiplies silver and gold. Moreover, while much is written of Solomon's riches, wisdom, and magnificence, we are never told that he read the law of the Lord. Thus at length the Lord has to say to him "thou hast not kept my covenant and my statutes which I have commanded thee" (1 Kings 11:11).

Here then we discover the root of division in Israel and, may we not say, the root of all divisions that have taken place among the people of God. First, unjudged worldliness that robs the people of true devotedness, and second disobedience to the Word of God.

Because of these things God tells Solomon that the kingdom will be rent in twain. We must remember, however, that the division will not be simply because of the failure of the King, but also on account of the failure of the people. When the prophet Ahijah tells Jeroboam that the Kingdom is going to be divided, he says nothing about the failure of Solomon, but speaks only of the failure of the people. The division will come says the Lord "because they have forsaken Me; and have worshipped Ashtoreth . . . and have not walked in my ways, to do that which is right in mine eyes, and keep my statutes and my judgments" (1 Kings 11:31-33).

Here again we find the root of division to be worldliness that turns aside to other gods, and disobedience to the Word of God, but now connected with the people. The folly and failure of the leaders however great would not necessarily cause division were it not for the low condition of the people of God

generally. “This is done of thee” condemns the individual; “they have forsaken Me,” reveals the low condition of the people, that is behind the failure of the leaders (cf. verses 11 and 33).

Such was the root of division, but how was the division actually brought about. The history is given in 1 Kings 12 and 2 Chronicles 10. King Solomon dies and his son Rehoboam comes to the throne. Immediately a crisis arises. There had been a long history of harsh actions, and grievous bondage, during the preceding years, and now a portion of the people rise up in protest. How is this met by the leader of the day? Rehoboam is counselled by the old men, who are rich in experience, that all will be well if he will “be kind to this people, and please them, and speak good words to them” (2 Chron. 10:7). Does not this carry our thoughts to Romans 15:1 to 4? In the first verse of this passage we have the “kindness” that bears “the infirmities of the weak” rather than putting grievous yokes upon them; in verses 2 and 3 we have the pleasing one another for “good to edification,” rather than pleasing ourselves; and in verse 4 we have the “good words” of Scripture for our comfort and hope.

Such is the spiritual advice of the old men; very different however is the counsel of nature, as given by the “young men”. They advise Rehoboam to take a course which appears highly commendable to nature as taking a strong line, and as maintaining authority and the majesty of the kingdom. Alas Rehoboam follows advice of nature. He assumes an overbearing and unreasonable attitude and threatens the protesters with violent and extreme discipline (1 Kings 12:12-15). The violence of the King is met by the violence of the

people who stone the King's officer, and, in result, division is consummated (1 Kings 12:16-19).

However to judge of the division simply by the folly of Rehoboam would have been to entirely miss the mind of God. People of that day, looking at the bare facts of the case, might have concluded that the division was wholly owing to the folly of Rehoboam. They might have argued, 'Had it not been that Rehoboam took such an overbearing and unreasonable attitude, threatening to bring us all into bondage by exercising a violent discipline upon the people of God, there would have been no division.' But however reasonable such arguments might appear to the natural mind they would have been false. It was true that Rehoboam's folly was the immediate cause of the division, but the word of God in judgment had gone forth long before the violent words of the King, and the mighty hand of God in discipline was behind the feeble hand of the King. The holy government of God was rending the kingdom, and behind the discipline of God was the low condition of the people.

The division having taken place, the further history of Rehoboam is exceedingly instructive, warning us of the snares to avoid, and instructing us as to the course to take, in the presence of divisions.

Rehoboam at once sets to work to bring the people of God together again, and, using the methods suited to the dispensation, he gathers together an army for this purpose. There is no question that it was in accord with God's thoughts that the people should be one. They had been one in the commencement of God's ways with them, and in the day to come they will be one according to the word of the prophet, "I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of

Israel; and one King shall be king to them all: and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all” (Ezek. 37:22). It might thus appear that Rehoboam was justified in his efforts to end the division and unite the people of God.

However he has to learn, and all Israel with him, that in spite of the division the ten tribes are still their “brethren,” and they are not to “go up nor fight against” them. Moreover Shemaiah, the man of God, tells Rehoboam why they must desist. It is because God says “This thing is done of Me.” God had rebuked Solomon for his worldliness and disobedience to the Word of God, and said to him, “Forasmuch as this is done of thee . . . I will rend the kingdom from thee.” Now that the blow has fallen, God can say to Rehoboam “This thing is done of Me.” To seek to undo the evil of Solomon may be right; to ignore the governmental acts of God is certainly wrong. (cf. 1 Kings 11:11 and 2 Chron. 11:4). Rehoboam and those with him have to learn, as indeed we all have to learn in the divisions that our own folly has brought about, that the government of God cannot be lightly ignored.

Very wisely Rehoboam, and the two tribes desisted from their efforts, as we read, they “obeyed the words of the Lord” (2 Chron. 11:4 ff.). They accept the humiliation and sorrow of the division and bow under the chastening hand of the Lord.

Henceforth Rehoboam remains within the restricted sphere that the division has brought about, for we read that “he dwelt in Jerusalem.” Does this however mean that he settles down to a life of quiet ease and inaction? Does he no longer concern himself with the interests of the people of God? Far from it, for at once we read he becomes a builder; he “built cities for defence in Judah” (vv. 5-10). As we might say in our day, he

“strengthened the things that remained.” Moreover he provided “store of victual, and of oil, and of wine” (v. 11). He provided food for the people of God.

What was the result? Judah became a refuge for the people of God: as we read “the priests and the Levites that were in all Israel resorted to him out of all their coasts,” and “out of all the tribes of Israel such as set their hearts to seek the Lord God of Israel came to Rehoboam.” “So they strengthened the kingdom of Judah” (vv. 13,16,17).

For three years this prosperity continued; then alas! Rehoboam forsook the law of the Lord (2 Chron. 12:1) and disaster speedily followed. Had he only continued in obedience who can say how much further prosperity might have been known?

Has this no voice for us in the presence of the divisions amongst the people of God in our day? Have not great efforts been put forth to end the divisions among the people of God, ending too often in adding to the confusion. Would it not be our wisdom to recognize the governmental hand of God upon us because of our worldliness and departure from the Word; to bow under the chastening hand of God; to accept the reproach and sorrow of division; to remain in quiet obedience to the Word, on God’s ground for His people, seeking to strengthen the things that remain, and feed the people of God? And would not those who in devotedness and faithfulness to the Word, resolutely acted in this way, become a refuge for the distressed people of God from every quarter?

2. JEREMIAH

Jeremiah 42, 43: 1-7

Four hundred years had passed since the great division in Israel when the events recorded in this chapter transpired. At this date we find the people of God not only divided but scattered. One hundred and thirty years before, the ten tribes had passed into captivity to become lost among the nations. Repeated captivities had thinned the ranks of Judah, until at length the kingdom, as such, had ceased to exist.

However a remnant of God's people are still found in God's land. In the opening verses of the forty-second chapter of Jeremiah they came to the prophet professing to seek light from the Lord for their path in the day of scattering. "All the people from the least even unto the greatest, came near." Counting, however, the least with the greatest, they have to own they are but a remnant, for they say "we are left but a few of many (v. 2). Their desire is, as they say, that the Lord "may shew us the way wherein we may walk, and the thing that we may do" (v. 3).

They recognise the ruin of the nation; they own they are but a few. In the midst of the ruin, and in confessed weakness, they meet together to enquire of the Lord the path He would have them to take and how He would have them to act. What course could be more fitting than for a little company of God's people, under such circumstances, to turn to the Lord for guidance?

Jeremiah accordingly undertakes to pray to the Lord on their behalf, and to declare to them the Lord's mind, keeping nothing back (v. 4). This leads this remnant to make the most

solemn protestation, that whatever the Lord's answer may be, they will "obey the voice of the Lord;" they rightly recognise that, doing so, it will be well with them. However dark the day, however great the ruin, it will still be well with those who obey "the voice of the Lord" (vv. 5, 6).

One thing, however, spoilt these fair words. As we shall see the after history discloses that underneath their good words self-will was at work. They had already determined to take their own course. The self-will of the flesh betrays itself by their too self-confident protestation of readiness to obey the voice of the Lord. How often since that day has the flesh shown itself by the self-confident word that betrayed the self-will of the heart. Are there not those who say, after the manner of this remnant, "Give us Scripture—give us the word of the Lord—and we will bow to it!" We may well fear that self-will lies behind such fair words.

However Jeremiah turns to the Lord, receiving an answer after ten days. During these days apparently he has no communications with the people. He will not venture an opinion of his own, as to the way in which they should walk and act. He will wait for clear directions from the Lord (v. 7).

The Lord's way is very plain. If this little remnant desire to be built up, and established; if they are to enjoy the Lord's presence with them, and the Lord's mercies, there is one condition they must comply with. They must "still abide in this land." However great the failure, however complete the ruin, there would still be blessing for a little remnant—a few of many—so long as they remain on God's ground for God's people. Their King and leaders may have fled, the house of the Lord be burned to the ground, and the walls of Jerusalem be

broken down (Jer. 52:7, 8, 13), nevertheless there would still be blessing for those who remained in the land. The Land was the place for all Israel, but alas! the great mass had passed into captivity and were lost among the nations, but all blessing, for the few who remained, depended upon their still abiding in the Land (vv. 9-12).

We may well pause in considering this story of people and events of a long past day, and ask ourselves, Has this story any lesson for those who in this present day, in great feebleness and weakness, seek to know “the way wherein we may walk, and the thing that we may do,” in the midst of the division and scattering that has taken place among the people of God? Is not the great lesson this, that, however great the ruin, however divided and scattered the people of God, blessing will be found by those who still remain on God’s ground for all God’s people. In other words, the way of blessing, in spite of all failure, is still to walk in the light of what is true for the whole Assembly of God, and to refuse all other ground.

No failure on our part can relieve us from the responsibility of walking and acting according to the truth of the Assembly of God whether viewed locally or collectively. The principles that should guide the Assembly still remain with all their force unfolded for us in the First Epistle to the Corinthians. It is true as one has said, “We are not to imitate those chapters, or play the part of Corinthians, as though we had all the gifts of Corinthians. Nor are we to assume to be the only light in our place, as the Church then was at Corinth. But we must have faith to know this, that the scattering of the lights or the judgment of the candlestick is not the withdrawal of the Spirit ... We must hold to God’s principles in the place or the scene around us ... We are not to expect, it may be, such corporate

power as would have been, had no divine judgment come upon the candlestick ... Again as we are not to surrender principles to the corruptions around, neither are we to give them up because of some disappointing efforts in asserting them. 'Let God be true but every man a liar.' We are not to give up principle because it is hotly assailed, neither are we to do so because it has been poorly and faintly illustrated. The principle outlives a thousand disappointing attempts to exhibit it. The light is not to be judged because of the soiled lamp through which it may shine . . . I may be grieved and disappointed that the candle has been, as it were, under a bushel, but I am to remember that it is a candle still, able to give light to all that are in the house" (J. G. Bellett).

Returning to the story of the remnant in Jeremiah's day, we shall find it has warning as well as instruction for us. Having given them the word of the Lord as to the way of blessing, Jeremiah proceeds to utter the word of the Lord in the way of warning (vv. 13-17). If the remnant say "We will not dwell in the land," we fear if we do it will mean conflict, and continual warnings by the sound of the trumpet, and possibly even lack of bread, and so we propose to leave the Land and seek escape from these things in another land,—if they speak and act thus—they are warned, that the very things they seek to escape will overtake them. Moreover, the most solemn thing of all will be, that instead of having the Lord with them in blessing, they will have the hand of the Lord upon them in government. They shall not escape says the Lord "from the evil that I will bring upon them" (vv. 13-17).

Has this no warning voice for us today? Are we not at times tempted to weary of God's path, and seek in some man-made system an easier path—some system in which, by the

introduction of worldly principles and methods, we shall escape the continual call for the exercise of faith? Do we not at times weary of the continual conflict in seeking to maintain the truth, and shrink from being disturbed by trumpet calls as to dangers that assail; are we not tempted to say, 'if we have to continually face conflict we fear we shall suffer spiritual starvation?' Are we not thus at times fiercely assailed by the tempter to give up God's truth for God's Assembly? In the presence of such arguments, whether arising in our own hearts. or whether suggested to us by others, let us remember the warnings of the Lord to the remnant of Jeremiah's day.

Firstly, to take a false step to escape trouble is the surest way to fall into the trouble we seek to escape. To leave God's ground to escape the difficulties of the path of faith, will entangle us with the world and overwhelm us with difficulties in the path of self-will. Secondly, the remnant are warned that those who take such a path will fall into reproach, and "see this place no more" (v. 18). It is a solemn consideration that those who have walked for a time in the light of the truth for God's Assembly, and have then given it up for an easier path in some man-made system have seldom if ever been recovered. They "see this place no more." When God in His government says "no more" there is an end of the matter.

Alas! those to whom Jeremiah spoke refused the instruction, and heeded not the warnings of the Lord. Jeremiah is not ignorant of the reason. He says, "Ye dissembled in your hearts," or according to a better translation, "Ye deceived yourselves in your own souls" (v. 20). The self-will that was determined to take a certain course deceived them. Nothing will so warp the understanding, and hinder the apprehension of the truth as self-will. It will not see what it does not want to

see. And, as ever, behind the self-will there was pride that would not admit they were wrong, as we read, “All the proud men” came to Jeremiah saying, “Thou speakest falsely: the Lord our God hath not sent thee to say, Go not into Egypt to sojourn there” (Jer. 43:3).

Moreover they tell Jeremiah that he is not governed by the word of the Lord, he is simply repeating man’s word. They practically say, We asked you for the word of the Lord, and you have simply told us what Baruch says, and if we follow what you say it will simply bring us all into bondage (Jer. 43:1-3).

Thus with hearts deceived by self-will and pride they turn from the instruction of the Lord and miss His “way.” They leave God’s ground for His people, take a path of their own choosing, and “see this place no more.”

Would we know “the way wherein we may walk, and the thing that we may do” let us obey the Lord’s word and “abide in this land.” Let us take heed to His warning, lest turning aside to some other path we too “see this place no more.”

3. DANIEL

Daniel 9

The abandonment of God's land by the remnant of Jeremiah's day, completed the scattering of God's people. Fifty years passed away and then God intervenes in His grace and grants a revival, under which a few of His people are set free from the captivity to return to the land. The experiences proper to those affected by this movement and the principles that should have guided them are set forth in the prayer and confession of Daniel. And therein we shall find much that is instructive to those who in our day have been set free from the systems of men to walk in the light of Christ and His Assembly.

The day in which we live is dispensationally very different to the day in which Daniel lived, and yet morally there is much that corresponds between the two periods.

In the first place, Daniel, in his day, could look back over one thousand years of failure amongst the professing people of God, for in his confession he goes back to the time when God brought Israel out of Egypt, and from that time he says, "We have sinned, we have done wickedly" (9:15).

Secondly, in the seventh and eighth chapters of Daniel he is permitted to look into the future and still he sees that failure and suffering await the people of God. He sees that the Gentile powers would make war against the saints and prevail against them; the daily sacrifice would be taken away; the truth would be cast down to the ground; the sanctuary trodden under foot; and that the enemy would prosper and destroy the mighty and holy people (Dan. 7:21, Dan. 8:11, 12, 13, 24).

Thirdly, he sees there will be no deliverance for God's people from this long history of failure, until the Son of Man comes and sets up His kingdom (Dan. 7:13, 14).

Thus Daniel, in his day, sees the past marked by failure, the future dark with predictions of deeper sorrows and greater failure, and no hope of deliverance for the people of God as a whole until the King comes.

In the presence of these things Daniel was deeply affected, his thoughts troubled him, his countenance was changed, and he fainted and was sick certain days (Dan. 7:28, Dan. 8:27).

We can hardly fail to see there is that which corresponds to these experiences of Daniel in our day: for we too look back over nearly two thousand years of failure amongst the professing people of God, and we too have learned that the little while that may yet remain, will be marked by increasing failure amongst the professing people of God. "In the last days," says the Apostle, "difficult times shall come," "evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse;" again he says, "the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine ... they shall turn away from the truth." Peter also warns us that "There shall be false teachers" among the people of God, who "privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them." Furthermore the third thing that Daniel saw is equally plain to us, for we also see from Scripture, that there will be no recovery for the people of God as a whole, until Christ comes.

But this is not the only correspondence between our day and that in which Daniel lived. For Daniel made another discovery. He learned from Scripture that, in spite of all past failure, and

in spite of all future disaster, God had foretold that there would be a little reviving in the midst of the years. He discovers by “the word of the Lord” to Jeremiah that after seventy years there would be some recovery from the desolations of Jerusalem. So we have learned from Scripture that in the midst of the corruptions and deadness of Christendom, as set forth in Thyatira and Sardis there would again be a revival in the midst of the years as set forth in Philadelphia.

This revival has four outstanding characteristics, for to Philadelphia the Lord says, first “Thou hast a little strength.” second, Thou “hast kept My word;” third, Thou “hast not denied My name;” and fourth, “Thou hast kept the word of My patience.” In a day when religious flesh is displaying itself in power as great Babylon, those under this revival would be marked by a position of outward weakness; when on every hand the Word is being belittled, they keep the Word in its purity and integrity; and when the Person of Christ is being attacked, they do not deny His Name. Moreover, when men are making desperate efforts to heal the divisions of Christendom, they keep the word of His patience. They wait the coming of Christ to heal the divisions and bring His people together in His presence.

Now obedience to the Word and the refusal to deny the Name of Christ will involve a great deal. To those who obey the Word, and give Christ His place it means the recovery of the truth of Christ and His Church, the heavenly calling, the coming of Christ and other related truths.

Moreover such are exposed to the constant danger of giving up the truths that have been recovered, and hence the warning to

such is, “Hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown,” and the exhortation is to “overcome.”

How then are we to “Hold fast,” and how are we to “overcome?”

It is evident we can neither “hold fast” nor “overcome” in our own strength. We can only “hold fast” and only be overcomers, as we are strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Hence we must look to the Lord, and this calls for prayer. Then if we pray to the Lord, if we seek His grace, it is necessary that there should be a moral condition suited to the Lord, and this calls for confession. And in respect of these two things, prayer and confession, we can learn much from Daniel. As we have seen he had looked back, and he had looked on and as he saw the condition of things amongst the people of God he was greatly distressed, and in his distress he did two things:—First he looked away from man to God, as he says in Daniel 9: 3, “I set my face unto the Lord God” to seek Him by prayer. Second, not only did he pray, but he adds, I “made my confession” (v. 4).

Now mark the result of this prayer and confession. The first result of turning to God is that he gets a great sense of the greatness, holiness and faithfulness of God. Man is very small, and Daniel may be fainting but the Lord is “great.” Moreover he realises that God is true to His word and that if only His people will cherish His Name—if they will love Him—and keep His Word, in spite of all their failure they will find mercy.

The second result of turning to God, in prayer and confession, is that he gets a deep sense of the total ruin of God’s people. He recognises that the low condition of God’s people lies at

the root of all the division and scattering that has come in amongst the people of God. He does not seek to place the blame for the division and scattering upon certain individuals, who may indeed have acted in a high-handed manner, and have perverted the truth and led many into error; but, looking beyond the failure of individuals he sees and owns the failure of God's people as a whole. He says, "We have sinned," "Our kings, our princes, our fathers, and all the people of the land" (Dan. 9:5, 6). Personally Daniel had no direct part in bringing about the scattering that had taken place seventy years before, but the absence of personal responsibility, and the lapse of time, does not lead him to ignore the division and scattering or seek to place the blame for it upon individuals long since passed from the scene; on the contrary he identifies himself before God with the people of God; he says "We have sinned."

In the history of Israel the people failed and in their low condition insisted upon a King, then the kings led them astray. So in the history of the Church. In the third and fourth chapters of 1 Corinthians the Apostle Paul traces all division back to the low carnal condition of the people that led them to range themselves under certain leaders; and the Apostle foresees that after his decease leaders would arise that would bring about open division, for he can say, "I know that after my decease ... of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."

Hence it would appear that the root of all division whether in Israel or the Church, can be traced back to the low moral condition of God's people as a whole, and not simply the wrong doing of individuals. Hence true confession must have in view all the people of God. Daniel does not think of one city only, (though that city may have taken the lead in failure), but,

with Jerusalem, he links “all Israel;” nor does he confine his thoughts to all Israel that may be “near” at hand, for he takes in all “that are near and that are far off” (9:7). With this example before us we may well ask what should be our great aim in confession and humiliation? Should it be simply that the breaches might be healed? Surely not—this must be left in the hands of the One before whom we have so grievously failed. Our end should be that we might be restored morally to the height of our calling from which we have departed.

A third result of Daniel’s prayer and confession is that he recognises the hand of God in government upon His people. He lays hold of this deeply important principle that when division and scattering have occurred these evils must be accepted as from God, acting in His holy discipline, and not simply viewed as brought about by particular acts of folly, or wickedness, on the part of individual men. This is clearly seen in the great division that took place in Israel. Instrumentally it was brought about by the folly of Rehoboam, but says God, “This thing is done of Me” (2 Chron. 11:4). Four hundred and fifty years later when the people of God were not only divided but scattered among the nations, Daniel very clearly recognises this great principle. He says, “O Lord righteousness belongeth unto Thee, but unto us confusion of faces, as at this day; to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and unto all Israel, that are near, and that are far off, through all the countries whither Thou hast driven them.” Then again he speaks of God “bringing upon us a great evil,” and yet again, “the Lord watched upon the evil and brought it upon us” (Dan. 9:7, 12, 14). Thus Daniel loses sight of the wickedness and folly of individual men. He mentions no names. He does not speak of Jehoiachin or “his abominations which he did,” nor of Zedekiah and his folly, nor does he refer to the ruthless

violence of Nebuchadnezzar, but, looking beyond all men, he sees, in the scattering, the hand of a righteous God.

Thus too a little later Zechariah hears the word of the Lord to the priests, and all the people of the land, saying, “I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not” (Zech. 7:5, 14).

So too Nehemiah, later still, in his prayer recalls the words of the Lord by Moses saying, “If ye transgress I will scatter you abroad” (Neh. 1:8).

There is no attempt with these men of God to modify their strong statements of God’s dealing in discipline. They do not even say that God has “allowed” His people to be scattered, or “permitted” them to be driven away, but they plainly say that God has driven the people away and brought the evil.

Fourth, another great principle that flows from turning to God in prayer and confession is, not only that we recognise God’s hand in dealing with us in discipline, but, that we have turned to the One who alone can gather and bless His people. So that in the acknowledgement of God’s hand in discipline lies the only hope of any reviving or any measure of recovery, for in setting our faces toward God we are looking to the One who can not only divide but unite, not only scatter but gather, not only break up but heal. (Hosea 6:1). Man indeed can scatter, and divide, and break up, but he cannot again gather and unite, and heal. God can do both and do both righteously. This is clearly seen in Daniel’s confession, for he says, “O Lord righteousness belongeth unto Thee ... Thou hast driven them etc.,” then again he says, “The Lord watched upon this evil, and brought it upon us: for the Lord our God is righteous in all

His works which He doeth” (vv. 7, 14). Then for a third time he appeals to the righteousness of God; but this time it is to bless and shew mercy, for he says, “O Lord according to all thy righteousness, I beseech Thee, let thine anger and thy fury be turned away” (v. 16).

Daniel bases his appeal upon the fact that however much the people might have failed, and God may have had to discipline them, yet they are His people. It is, says Daniel, “Thy city Jerusalem,” “Thy holy mountain,” “Thy people” that are in reproach, “Thy Sanctuary that is desolate,” and it is “Thy servant that prays” (vv. 16, 17). Then he pleads that the blessing might be granted ‘for the Lord’s sake” (v. 17). Thirdly, he pleads the Lord’s “great mercies;” and finally, he pleads the Lord’s Name, for he says, “Thy city and Thy people are called by Thy Name” (v. 19).

Here then we have portrayed some of the great principles that should guide us in a day of confusion and ruin.

- First, to turn to God in prayer and confession, and in His presence to get a fresh sense of His greatness, holiness, and mercy to those who are prepared to keep His word (vv. 3, 4).
- Second, to confess our failure and the totality of our ruin (vv. 5-15).
- Third, to recognise and own the righteousness of God in dealing with us in His government (vv. 7, 14, 15).
- Fourth, to fall back on the righteousness of God that can act in mercy and grant some reviving.

4. The Old Prophet of Bethel

1 Kings 13:1-32; 2 Kings 23:17,18

The events recorded in the thirteenth chapter of the First Book of Kings transpired in a day when the nation of Israel was falling into apostasy. For this reason they have special significance, and warning, for believers whose lot, as in the present day, is cast in the midst of a corrupt Christendom fast moving on to the great apostasy.

The story unfolded is mainly concerned with three persons—King Jeroboam, “a man of God out of Judah,” and “an old prophet in Bethel.”

Jeroboam had received a definite word from God through the prophet Ahijah that he should reign over the ten tribes of Israel; and, he was told, that if he would hearken unto God’s commands, walk in God’s ways, and keep the statutes and commandments of the Lord, God would be with him and establish his house. Alas! When Jeroboam came to the throne, instead of depending upon God and His word, he sought to establish his kingdom by his own devices. Having no faith in God he fell back on natural reason, and human schemes to keep the professing people of God together. So acting, he sealed the doom of his kingdom by setting up two golden calves, and saying to the people, “Behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt” (1 Kings 12:28). One calf he set in Bethel and the other in Dan. The solemn result was the people became worshippers of these false gods, “sacrificing unto the calves”: and were thus led into apostasy. Bethel, where Jacob had set up a pillar as a witness to God’s unconditional promise of blessing to the seed of Jacob, and

God's unchanging faithfulness to His own word, becomes the witness to man's sin and apostasy. Through their leaders the enemy had succeeded in undermining the people's confidence in God and thus separating them from Him.

God however raised up a witness against this fearful evil. He sent a man of God out of Judah to Bethel to condemn the wickedness of Jeroboam. "By the word of the Lord", this man was enlightened as to the evil in Bethel. He learnt that this evil was so abhorrent to God that the day was soon coming when God would deal with it in judgment (v.1, 2). He was directed by sign and word to witness against the evil (v.3). He was specially warned against weakening his testimony by associating with the evil. He was to deliver his message, give his sign, and then depart. On no account was he to eat bread, or drink water, at Bethel, nor was he to turn again by the same way that he came. He was to have no fellowship with the false position of those who, while professing to be the people of God, were walking in disobedience to the word of the Lord (v. 9, 10).

With great faithfulness the man of God delivers his message and gives the sign, which comes to pass. The enraged king charges his servants to lay hold of the man of God, who is silent in the presence of threats and acts in interceding grace when God smites the man by whom he is threatened. Finally he is proof against the king's offer of rewards, and, in obedience to the word of the Lord, firmly refuses to eat or drink at Bethel.

In all these ways the man of God faithfully discharges his mission, and yet withal in a spirit of grace, while firmly refusing to be drawn into association with evil.

Passing on to the latter part of this instructive story, we find that faithfulness to the word of the Lord is put to a further and yet severer test. This portion of the story is introduced with the significant words:— “Now there dwelt an old prophet in Bethel” (v.11). In the very place of the evil that the man of God was sent to denounce, and with which the Lord said he was not to have any association by eating or drinking—in this place, a brother prophet had found his dwelling. He was truly a prophet, and was aware of the evil, but, dwelling in a wrong association he not only was unable to witness against it, but actually put his sanction upon it. It is through this “brother” and “prophet” that the obedience of the man of God is put to the test. It is a severe test, for not only could this old man plead the experience of age. Moreover, he shows much gracious hospitality to a weary and hungry brother. “Come home,” he says, “with me, and eat Bread.” Above all he claims that an angel had given him “the word of the Lord” to bring the man of God back to his house.

To refuse such an appeal would appear to be putting a slight upon a brother prophet. It would also have the appearance of disrespect for old age; it would look like indifference to brotherly kindness that was so ready to show hospitality. Above all it would have the appearance of ignoring the direct word of the Lord by an angel. Yet the story clearly shows that behind all these specious reasons that nature might plead, there was the effort of the enemy to undermine the word of the Lord by involving the man of God in a wrong association.

How does the man of God act in the presence of this strong and subtle temptation? Alas! Apparently on the plea of respect for old age, response to brotherly kindness, fellowship with a fellow servant, and professed obedience to the word of the Lord, though this communication of the old prophet plainly

invalidated and contradicted his first instructions from God, he allowed himself to be drawn into a wrong association by disobedience to them. An old prophet may alas! Become a deceiver and seduce one from loyalty and obedience.

It is easy to see how serious was this disobedience to the word of God.

- First, by turning back to eat and drink with the old prophet at Bethel, the man of God put his sanction on an association which God's word condemned.
- Secondly, he put his sanction upon the unfaithfulness of the old prophet in living in such an association.
- Thirdly, he nullified his own testimony by sanctioning the very evil against which he was sent to witness.

What, we may ask, should have kept the man of God from falling into this snare? His own word gives the answer, for he confesses, "So was it charged me by the word of the Lord, saying, eat no bread, nor drink water, nor turn again by the same way that thou camest." Evidently, then, his safe/guard against every effort to draw him into a false association was unswerving obedience to the word of God. In reference to this scene one has truly said, "Whenever God has made His will known to us, we are not to allow any after influence whatever to call it in question, even although the latter may take the form of the word of God... In every case our part is to obey what He has said."

If the word of God charged him not to eat and drink at Bethel, in spite of the fact that a brother prophet was dwelling there, was the man of God to turn back and eat and drink because a brother prophet was at Bethel? If his eye had been single

would he not have discerned why the word of God so strictly forbade him to associate with the old prophet? How was it that, when God was denouncing evil at Bethel, he has to send a prophet from Judah, seeing there was already a prophet at Bethel? Does not this action tell us that the old prophet at Bethel was not himself separate from evil, and therefore not a vessel fit and meet for the Master's use?

Being in a false position the old prophet was ready to go to great lengths to get the man of God to sanction his unfaithfulness by associating with it. Alas! The man of God fell into the snare and destroyed his own testimony by associating with one who, while admitting the evil, yet bore with it.

Thus, as it has been truly said, of this man of God, "He is proof against temptation when presented in the form of evil, and he falls when tempted by apparent good. The voice of a brother, his standing and reputation, are honoured above the word of God. He disobeys God and accredits a lie in his brother.... He triumphed over the opposition of the world without, and is seduced into unfaithfulness by a brother within." By abstaining from eating and drinking with the king he took God's part against the evil: by returning to eat and drink with the old prophet he took his part in associating with it.

The last part of the story (verse 20 to 32) clearly shows that God is not indifferent to the unfaithfulness of the old prophet nor the failure of the man of God. In the governmental ways of God both come under His chastening.

The old prophet is justly punished inasmuch as God compels him to expose his own duplicity by pronouncing judgment upon the man of God, he has to learn that, if he regards the

word of God, the very one by whom he has been drawn into disobedience will be the instrument in God's hand for exposing his sin.

The severity of the judgment that overtakes the man of God clearly shows how deeply God resented his disobedience. The Lord had given this man of God great light as to the evil of Bethel and His abhorrence of it, and the judgment was coming upon it. Great honour had been put upon him in being used as a witness against the evil. God had plainly warned him against being entangled in a false association. In spite of light, and privilege, and warning, he allowed himself to be drawn into a false association with the result that in spite of all former faithfulness, and boldness, his career as a witness for God is closed on earth. It is no small matter to disregard the word of God and sin against the light.

Nevertheless we are permitted to see that if God, in His holiness, has to chasten His people for their failure and unfaithfulness, yet He is not unrighteous to forget any work or labour of love that has been shewn toward His Name. So it comes to pass that three hundred and fifty years after these events, when Josiah carries out the word of the lord, by the man of God, and burns the bones of false prophets, he spares the sepulchre of the man of God who came from Judah and the old prophet of Bethel. Through their unfaithfulness, the people of God may come under His chastening but, through the faithfulness of God they will not share in the judgment that overtakes the world (2 Kings 23:15-18).

In seeking to apply the lessons of this striking story, we do well to remember three great facts:—

- First, in the day in which we live there has been, by the grace of God, a recovery of the great truths concerning Christ and the Church as revealed in the word of God.
- Secondly, in the light of the recovery of the truth many have had their eyes opened to see how far Christendom has departed from the truth. Like the man out of Judah, we see that, as it was in Israel, so in Christendom, the corrupt condition of the professing mass is leading to apostasy and judgment.
- Thirdly, with our eyes opened to see the departure from the truth, we have also been enlightened as to God's mind for the individual believer in relation to the corruption of Christendom. We have learned that the knowledge of the truth on the one hand, and the corruption of Christendom on the other, demands entire separation from that which is a denial of the truth and is coming under the judgment of God.

Christendom has organised itself into a number of systems and denominations which form a religion established on earth, having a human order of priests between the people and God—a religion suited to man in the flesh. Such a religion was Judaism, and such Christendom has become. God calls this system “the Camp,” and from such, true believers are exhorted “To go forth ... unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach” (Heb. 12:13).

Moreover, we read, “Let everyone that nameth the name of the Lord withdraw from iniquity” and, again, we are to “purge” ourselves from vessels to dishonour, and “flee also youthful lusts” (2 Tim. 2:19-22).

Thus the word of God makes it very clear that in a day of ruin the separation to which we are called is both ecclesiastical and personal. Alas! There may be one without the other. We may be truly separate from the ecclesiastical evil and yet fail in personal holiness. Or there may be personal separation, as in the church at Sardis where there were a few names which had not defiled their garments, but no separation from a lifeless and condemned ecclesiastical system. True separation to Christ combines both. And, as in the days of the man of God from Judah, so in ours, the power of our testimony will be in proportion to the reality of our separation.

This being so, those who have gone without the Camp unto Christ will find, as with the man of God from Judah, all the efforts of the enemy will be directed to marring their testimony by once again drawing them into associations condemned by the word of God. To gain his ends the devil employs today the same devices by which he sought to encompass the downfall of the man of God. First, he will seek to entangle us in false associations by some worldly advantage that the association may offer, even as he sought to entice the man of God into disobedience to the word of God by the King's rewards. Secondly, having failed to turn us aside by this by this device he will endeavour to do so by the much more subtle device of a fellow Christian in a false position.

Many, like the man of God of old, may firmly reject the first device only to fall by the second. We may see that the association is condemned by the word of God, and one, if there were no Christians in it, that we should have nothing to do with. This being so we may well ask ourselves, Are we right in going back into a false association under the plea that Christians are there? If God calls us out of the Camp, in spite of some remaining in the Camp, can it be right to return to the Camp because they are there?

Nevertheless the appeal to go back often comes with great force and under many specious pleas. Brotherly love, old friendships, the desire to help the Lord's people and strengthen the things that remain, may all be used as reasons for going back into associations condemned by the word of God. Moreover, we have the flesh in us, and at times the call to go back may flatter the vanity and self-importance of the natural heart. Nor can we shut our eyes to the fact that the brother, who seeks to draw us back, also has the flesh in him, and, as with the old prophet of Bethel, may seek to draw us into a wrong association with the low motive of seeking to justify himself in that false position.

The fact that we have left associations condemned by the word of God, is in itself a testimony against them. To go back is to annul our testimony and, in principle, build again the things we have destroyed.

Moreover, we may well ask, Does the brother by going back into a false association really help the Christians in the false position? Or, will he by so doing deliver such from a false association? It is evident that the man of God by eating and drinking at Bethel in disobedience to the word of God, neither helped the old prophet nor delivered him from his false position.

Furthermore, by going back into wrong associations are we not in danger of not only destroying our testimony against the evil, but also, like the man of God from Judah, ending our career as a witness for the truth?

It is only as we walk in unswerving obedience to the word of God, that we shall escape the devices of the enemy to draw us

back into the wrong position. Let us then seek that the word may have its absolute authority over our souls, and be content to take the outside path with all its obscurity, content if the Lord can say of us, “Thou hast a little strength, and hast kept My word and hast not denied My Name.” (Rev. 3:8).

H. S.

Other titles suggested for further reading:



- *Unity and Authority*, booklet, W. R. Dronsfield
- *Lectures on the Church of God*, hb, William Kelly
- *The Assembly of God*, booklet, C. H. Mackintosh
- *Path of Faith in an Evil Time*, booklet, H. H. Snell

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