

Living Messages of the Books of The Bible

GENESIS TO MALACHI

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE MESSAGE OF EZRA

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The Potter in His Activity. "He made it again another Vessel."

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B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

I. Concerning God the living Message is that of the Permanent Value

- i. The ultimate Word in Sovereignty.
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II. To Man the living Message consists of the things resulting

Haggai 2:4

- i. Conviction in place of Carelessness.
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- iv. Confidence in place of Contempt.

- ii. The Things gained.
 - a. A Place.
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THE book of Ezra cannot be considered alone. In order that we may study it, and its message, it is necessary that we should first recognize the connection between it and the two following books. The three deal with the history of the period in which one of the prophecies of Jeremiah was fulfilled.

Let us read from Jeremiah, first, in the twenty-fifth chapter, verses eleven to fourteen:

“And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the LORD, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations. And I will bring upon that land all my words which I have pronounced against it, even all that is written in this book, which Jeremiah hath prophesied against all the nations. For many nations and great kings shall serve themselves of them also: and I will recompense them according to their deeds, and according to the works of their own hands.”

Again in the twenty-ninth chapter, verses ten to fourteen:

“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. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. And I will be found of you, saith the LORD: and I will turn away your captivity, and I will gather you from all the nations, and from all the places whither I have driven you, saith the LORD; and I will bring you again into the place whence I caused you to be carried away captive.”

These words are taken from the prophecies which were delivered before the fall of Jerusalem, and on the occasion of Jeremiah's visit to Zedekiah. The king of Babylon and his army were threatening Jerusalem; and Jeremiah suffered because he persistently declared that they would successfully take the city, carry away the king, and destroy the people.

Seventy years had elapsed from the fall of Jerusalem. The power of Babylon had been broken, and that forever. Cyrus the Elamite was on the throne; king of Persia, though not a native of Persia, taking that name because Persia was the strongest of the countries he had mastered; king of Babylon, because he had broken the power of Babylon, in exact fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy, after seventy years. Thus, Persia had become the ruling power.

We now come to the story of the events, the first of which the two books of Chronicles were written to inspire.

The permanent value of the three books lies in their revelation of the Divine activity overruling human failure.

Before the messages actually delivered to Zedekiah, Jeremiah had uttered two on the supremacy of the Lord; the first describing a visit to the potter's house, and the second dealing with the vessel broken. The first of these opens thus, **"The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause thee to hear My words. Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought his work on the wheels. And when the vessel that he made of the clay was marred in the hand of the potter, he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it."**

That is the picture Jeremiah saw in the house of the potter. He then applied it in these words:

"Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay in the potter's hand, so are ye in Mine hand, O house of Israel."

The house of Israel is the clay. God is the Potter. He wrought His work on the wheels; the vessel was marred in the hands of the Potter. That is the history of everything from Abraham to the Captivity.

What next? **"He made it again another vessel."**

Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are the books that tell us the story of how God began to make again the vessel that had been marred in His own hand. God has not finished that work yet. He will finish it. Israel is not cast off forever. God has yet His work to do in this world through His ancient people.

In Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther I see God's new beginning. We are tempted to think that the work is slow. Never let us descend to the vulgarity of measuring God by man-made almanacs. In the light of what I have attempted to say of its relation, we may consider the book of Ezra.

Let us first pass over it and notice four things:

- The Lord's instruments;
- The Lord's might;
- The Lord's people;
- The Lord's work.

First, then, the Lord's instruments. These were found both outside and inside the covenant people. The hour had come when the vessel was so marred and spoiled that God began again, but He began with the same piece of clay. The instruments outside were Cyrus, Darius, Artaxerxes, each one of whom issued a decree which was inspired of God, as surely as were the messages of Isaiah.

God laid the constraint of His mighty power upon the heart of kings. He girded Cyrus, although

Cyrus had not known Him. He took this man outside the covenant, and pressed him into the accomplishment of His own purpose. So also with Darius and Artaxerxes. God was beginning a new thing, and He took hold of mighty kings and warriors, and made the very marching of their armies part of His progress, and used the sighing of captives under their control to touch their heart and drive their will, so that they cooperated with Him.

He found His instruments inside also; Zerubbabel, the man with the Babylonish name, a grandson of Jehoiachim, and a prince of Judah in the Davidic line; and Joshua, the son of Jehozadak. These two embodied the twofold principle that had been manifest in all His dealings with the people, that of the king and the priest. These He placed in the midst of ruin and degradation, and they began to inspire other hearts, and so the new movement commenced.

Then Ezra also, "**A ready scribe in the law of Moses,**" which does not mean merely that he was a man who was able to write clearly and accurately.

This is the first place in which the word "scribe" occurs in the Bible in the sense in which we perpetually find it in the New Testament. Jesus used the word at the close of His parables concerning the Kingdom, when He said: "**Every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old.**" The scribe was the interpreter, the teacher, the unfolders of the meaning of the will of God. In that sense Ezra was "**a ready scribe in the law of Moses.**"

Thus God laid His hand upon Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes outside the covenant; and upon Zerubbabel, Joshua, and Ezra within the covenant. The principle revealed is that God presses into His service men who do not know Him, and who are unconscious that they are carrying out His will; and inspires men who do know Him, and compels them to constructive activity. We cannot study the three edicts, recognizing that they were the edicts of pagan kings, without recognizing them as inspired of God. His might was manifested, moreover, in the way in which He qualified His workers for the work they had to do; gathered His people from far and near - not merely Judah, all the tribes of Israel being represented.

That leads us to the Lord's people, the clay, the remnant composed of members of all the tribes. "**So the priests, and the Levites, and some of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinim, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.**" "**And the children of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy. And they offered at the dedication of this house of God an hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs; and for a sin offering for all Israel, twelve he goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.**" God, in remaking, did not merely take two tribes, but representatives of all the twelve.

When He brought them back from captivity, He established one great truth in the world, and in the midst of human history; that of the unity of Deity. They came back, having learned only the first thing, but they never forgot it again. The great word of Moses was, "**The Lord thy God is one Lord.**" The unity of Deity produces the unification of humanity in the worship of the one God. Believe that, and there can be no idolatry.

But they turned to idolatry, until Israel was driven into captivity, and Judah also. Seventy years passed over their heads, and they came back, and never set up an idol again.

Ephraim said, “**What have I to do any more with idols?**” They had a great deal more to learn; but from the hour in which they came back under Zerubbabel, until this hour, call them Jews, Hebrews or Israelites, as you will, this one thing is certain; they have never set up an idol. They became a people, poor in many respects, failing in many respects; yet through crushing, bruising, and discipline, a people who in human history embody the truth that there is one God.

Finally, notice the Lord's work. When these people gathered back they had lost their national influence. Never again did they so stand alone, as to be able to bear their distinctive testimony, in such a way as to produce conviction. Yet there was gain in that hour when the remnant came back. They began building, and built with some interruptions for twenty years; then stopped, and for sixty years nothing was done. But God was at work. He had found a place for them, and as Jeremiah said, it was the place from which He drove them out. They were back at the geographical center. Not merely had He found a place. He had saved that peculiar people and race from extinction by absorption.

The Pharisees were born in this period, and as a result of the Divine movement. The Pharisees were first of all men who set themselves against anything in the nature of intermixture with the nations around. At last that exclusiveness became a bondage and a curse, as a very good thing does if it is not allowed to expand and to express itself in new forms. Pharisaiism was a true thing in its inception, being an endeavor to keep the race distinct until He should come through it, and of it, after the flesh, who by His coming was able to proceed to the larger things of which these people had been the foreshadowing. God had begun to make it again another vessel.

If that be the permanent value, what is the living message of the book? Its living message concerning God is the permanent value. “**He made it again.**”

That is the ultimate word in sovereignty. It is so different from anything men had ever dreamed or done. The ultimate word of sovereignty as man has misunderstood it, and misinterpreted it in his own government, is that if you have had an opportunity and failed, sovereignty smites and crushes you and flings you out. The last word of God's sovereignty is, “**He made it again.**” That helps me.

The same truth is found in the story of Jonah, “**The word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time.**”

The clay is in the hand of the Potter, but the vessel is marred, the ideal is not realized, the clay that might have been a shape of exquisite beauty is crushed. God's sovereignty says, I will begin again. If that be the ultimate word of sovereignty, it reveals the fact that its inspiration is His love, His compassion, His pity. Of course, if a man will not have it so, his blood is upon his own head. If a nation will not have it so, then its dust and ashes are of its own creation. But the very inspiration of Divine sovereignty is expressed there, “**He made it again.**” Therefore, the sovereignty of God is the strength of hope on the darkest day that ever comes.

“He made it again.”

- How it helps me about my own life.
- How it helps me about the things of my service, which are so poor and so broken.
- How it helps me when I see the cause of the peoples I serve falling to pieces in disaster,
- How it helps me when I see the chosen instruments of the Lord failing in the day of catastrophe.
- How it helps me when I feel that which is most hopeful is blighted by frost,
- Then there is an anthem in my heart, **“He made it again.”**

Take God off His throne, and my song ceases, the blossom of my hope withers, and my heart is broken.

The living message of the book, therefore, consists in the appeal consequent upon the fact of the Divine government and sovereignty, and is expressed in the word of Haggai: **“Be strong, O Zerubbabel, saith the Lord; and be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; and be strong, all ye people of the land, saith the Lord, and work: for I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts.”**

That is the message. Be strong, because I am with you, says the Lord, I am still on the throne. God is still able to gird Cyrus. Change your names. God still holds in His hand the German Emperor, the Russian Emperor, King George the Fifth. Do not get back into these old centuries and miss the living message. Do not imagine that God manipulated Cyrus, and leaves the kings of to-day alone. They are all within the hand of God.

Because I am with you, **“Be strong . . . and work.”**

That is the message. Take the book of Haggai, which is so intimately related to Ezra. How were these people to be strong, and work? They were to have conviction of the throne of God in place of carelessness; consecration in place of despair; courage in place of cowardice; confidence in God’s ultimate, instead of contempt for the poverty of the day in which they lived and served.

“God’s in His heaven, all’s right with the world”; but I must be strong, and work. There must be the song in my heart that tells, **“He will make it again”**; but there must be agony in my heart, travail in my life, the cross in my service, so that I may march right onward to the goal.

~ end of chapter 15 ~

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