

Ezra

Meditations on the Book of Ezra

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INTRODUCTION

In the third or fourth year* of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and in the first year of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, this same Nebuchadnezzar went up against Jerusalem, laid siege to it (Dan. 1: 1), took Jehoiakim captive and bound him with chains of brass to carry him away to Babylon. (2 Chr. 36: 6) At this time, he carried away part of the vessels of the house of the Lord in order to adorn the temple of his god. (2 Chr. 36: 7; Ezra 1: 7; Dan. 1: 2) He also carried away to Babylon a certain number of young people, who belonged either to the royal family or to the nobility. (Dan 1: 3)

*See Dan. 1:1; Jer. 25: 1. The Old Testament frequently presents these differences in calculation, as a fragment of a year was often counted as an entire year.

The Chaldean monarch then seems to have changed his disposition toward the captive king, for we see Jehoiakim re-established on his throne at Jerusalem where he reigned for eleven years. (2 Chr. 36: 5; 2 Kings 23: 36) But three years after he had been re-integrated in his kingdom, Jehoiakim rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar, who was occupied elsewhere, did not go up against him personally, but, until the end of his reign, at the instigation of the king of Babylon, Jehoiakim was harassed by enemy bands of Chaldeans, Syrians, Moabites and Ammonites. According to Jeremiah's prophecy, Jehoiakim died a violent death, and his body, which was drawn and cast out

beyond the walls of Jerusalem where it was exposed to the heat by day and to the frost by night, was "buried with the burial of an ass." (Jer. 22: 19; Jer. 36: 30) Nevertheless it is said that he "slept with his fathers" (2 Kings 24: 6), an expression which seems to imply that at first he was placed in the sepulchers of the kings.

Jehoiachin (or Jeconiah, 1 Chr. 3: 16) succeeded his father Jehoiakim, but reigned for only three months at Jerusalem. It was against Jehoiachin and his people that Nebuchadnezzar vented the wrath accumulated in his heart by the false, disloyal conduct of Jehoiakim. The servants of the king of Babylon "came up against Jerusalem, and the city was besieged. And Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came against the city, while his servants were besieging it. And Jehoiachin king of Judah went out to the king of Babylon, he, and his mother, and his servants, and his princes, and his chamberlains; and the king of Babylon took him in the eighth year of his reign. And he brought out thence all the treasures of the house of Jehovah, and the treasures of the king's house, and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold that Solomon king of Israel had made in the temple of Jehovah, as Jehovah had said. And he carried away all Jerusalem, and all the princes, and all the mighty men of valour, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and smiths: none remained but the poorest sort of the people of the land. And he carried away Jehoiachin to Babylon..." (2 Kings 24: 10-15) Later, Evil-merodach, Nebuchadnezzar's son and successor, in the first year of his reign, lifted Jehoiachin out of prison, set his throne above the throne of the kings who were with him at Babylon, and provided for him at his court all the days of his life. (2 Kings 25: 27-30)

After Jehoiachin was taken away captive, Nebuchadnezzar established Zedekiah, his uncle, and made him "take oath by God" (2 Chr. 36: 13) to remain faithful to him. But Zedekiah profaned the name of the Lord by breaking his oath and rebelled against the king of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar then came against Jerusalem with his entire army and captured the city after a terrible siege lasting two years which reduced the inhabitants of the city to famine. Zedekiah was taken, his sons were slain before his eyes, his eyes were put out, and he was taken away to Babylon, burdened with chains of brass. Priests, temple guards, and men of war were massacred; the temple, the king's palace, and all the houses of Jerusalem were burned; and the walls of the city were broken down. All the gold, silver and brass of the house of the Lord was carried away. "And Nebuzaradan the captain of the body-guard carried away captive the rest of the people that were left in the city, and the deserters that had deserted to the king of Babylon, and the rest of the multitude. But the captain of the body-guard left of the poor of the land for vinedressers and husbandmen." (2 Kings 25: 11-12)

The history which we have just delineated, according to the Biblical accounts, proves that the Babylonian captivity took place at three different epochs: the first; at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign; the second: during the short period of Jehoiachin's (or Jeconiah's) reign; and finally, the third: in the eleventh year of Zedekiah. The last two epochs were the most terrible, but the seventy years of captivity predicted by the prophet Jeremiah date from the first epoch (2 Chr. 36: 21; Dan. 9: 12; Jer. 25: 1, 11, 12; Jer. 29: 10, where 70 years are "accomplished for Babylon", that is to say, from the first year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign; cf. Jer. 25: 1)

This first captivity had a particular character: unlike the second and the third captivities which were marked by devastation and the great number of men carried away, the first captivity was marked by the spoiling of the house of the Lord, which was deprived of precious objects *used for the service of worship* (Dan. 1: 1, 2; Ezra 1: 7; 2 Chr. 36: 7) At the time of Judah's restoration, all these objects, numbering 5400 (Ezra 1: 9-11), were returned, and this was even the most characteristic feature of this exodus which was to bring the remnant of the people back to their land. The dominant feature at the beginning of these 70 years, is that the glory of the temple, the glory of the service of the worship of

the Lord, was itself taken away captive. A few years later, when Jehoiachin was a prisoner, Ezekiel saw moreover the glory of God leave, regretfully as it were, this house, which He had desired to make His dwelling place forever, and yet a few more years after this event, the temple, spoiled of its last ornaments, was burned and reduced to a heap of ruins.

Thus the captivity dates from this first period. God had been dishonored by the idolatry of the people and their kings: was there any great difference whether the precious vessels remained in His temple or were placed in the temple of idols at Babylon? And it is in this event that we find the essential character of the beginning of the captivity. Nothing of this kind had ever taken place previously. At the time of his rebellion against Sennacherib, Hezekiah had no doubt given him all the silver found in the temple, and in order to pay the tribute imposed on him, he had stripped the doors and pillars of the gold which covered them (2 Kings 18: 15, 16), but he did not touch the vessels destined for the service of worship. Under Jehoiachin, Nebuchadnezzar plundered, in a much greater measure, *all* the treasures of the house of God and smashed the vessels which Solomon had made, according to the commandment of the Lord, but, I repeat, this was an unprecedented profanation: the ornamentation of a temple of idols with the vessels designed for the worship service of the true God, took place only under Jehoiachin. When wicked Belshazzar, with his lords, his wives and his concubines, drank wine in sacred vessels, in praise of his idols, he intended by this means to celebrate the triumph of false gods over the true God, and to oppose them to the Lord publicly. In that same night, God answered him by judgment and death. Daniel, carried away from Jerusalem with his companions, at the beginning of the seventy years of captivity, was the prophet of this judgment (Dan. 5). In the first year of Darius, the Mede, he understood, through reading Jeremiah, that the end of the captivity was near. Daniel then humiliated himself on behalf of the people and witnessed the restoration of Judah in the first year of Cyrus, for he was still in Babylon in the third year of this king (Ezra 1: 1; Dan. 10: 1).

Ezra 1 and Ezra 2

First exodus

The first year of Cyrus marks the end of the captivity, just as the first year of Nebuchadnezzar had marked its beginning. Cyrus undertakes the restoration of the people and the temple; his first care is to return to the Jews the utensils for worship, which Nebuchadnezzar had formerly placed in the house of his god. The Persian king was aware of his mission and he knew what God had announced beforehand concerning himself through the prophets. Daniel was capable of instructing him concerning these things; Isaiah had said: "[He is] my shepherd, and he shall perform all my pleasure; even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid" (Isa. 44: 28). Cyrus alludes to this passage when he says: "All the kingdoms of the earth has Jehovah the God of the heavens given to me, and he has *charged* me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah" (Ezra 1: 2). He could read these words in the prophets, which were written long before his birth: "Thus saith Jehovah to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him — and I will loose the loins of kings; to open before him the two-leaved doors; and the gates shall not be shut: I will go before thee, and make the elevated places plain; I will break in pieces the brazen doors, and cut asunder the bars of iron; and I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places; that thou mayest know that I, Jehovah, who call thee *by name*, [am] the God of Israel. For Jacob my servant's sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee *by thy name*: I surnamed thee, though thou didst not know me; I [am] Jehovah, and there is none else; there is no God beside me:

I girded thee, and thou hast not known me..." (Isa. 45: 1-5).

Cyrus, like the kings of Persia who succeeded him, detested idols. Acknowledging the God of Israel as "the God of the heavens", he particularly insists here on the fact that "*he is God*" (v. 3). In like manner Artaxerxes, king of Persia, later openly declares that the Lord God of Israel is "the God of the heavens" (Ezra 7: 21, 23).

But all this: these intellectual convictions (which might have nothing to do with a work of conscience or a living faith) and even the assurance of being an instrument chosen to accomplish the designs of God (v. 2), did not suffice to bring about the restoration of the captives. God intended to show that it was *He* Himself and no other who fulfilled His Word; this is why it is said: "Jehovah *stirred up* the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia" (v. 1). He also stirred up the spirit of the chief fathers of Judah and Benjamin and the spirit of the priests and of Levites (v. 5). It was only then that they returned to their land, but in the midst of what impoverishment! They had no cloud, no ark, and no Urim or Thummim! (Ezra 2: 63)

The book of Ezra has great significance *for us*. In the second book of Kings*, we have seen how the beginning of Judah's decline was momentarily interrupted by the two periods of *Revival* which characterized the reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah. Then, the lamp of testimony, which was then about to go out, suddenly threw off rays of brightness and, had the people taken heed, their final judgment might have been yet prevented or delayed; but this was not the case, for after these blessed and prosperous interludes, the evil, which had been repressed for a moment, once again gained the upper hand with growing intensity, so that judgment was its obligatory conclusion. The ruin was total.

*Meditations on the second book of Kings, by H. R.

Now, it was out of this ruin that, in the book of Ezra, God calls a *Remnant*. Not that these "children of the captivity" were in reality or collectively the *true* remnant of Israel; the true remnant was taken out from their midst and was separated from them, as the prophet Malachi teaches us. Thus, the true remnant was composed of those who feared the Lord and spoke to one another (Mal. 3: 16). When the Messiah appeared, those believers were living in Judea and were waiting for the deliverance of Israel; and when the public ministry of Jesus began, this same remnant, in the person of the twelve disciples and those who had received the word of Christ, surrounded the Savior. And moreover, at the end of the times spoken of in prophecy, this same remnant will wait for the appearance of the Messiah in glory, in the midst of the open apostasy of the people.

Nevertheless, even though this remnant of Judah, who returned to Jerusalem under Cyrus, in order to wait for the Messiah and to welcome Him, are not the true remnant, the Holy Spirit presents them as exemplifying the *characteristics* which a *believing remnant* should assume in a time of ruin: they are a most salutary example for us, Christians, who presently find ourselves in the midst of the ruins of Christendom: an example through which we learn how we may be witnesses of God in difficult circumstances. This is the important subject which the first Ezra of our book will present to us.

There were 24,144 people (Ezra 2: 1-35)* who returned from the captivity under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua (or Joshua), the high priest, assisted by nine chief men. From verse 3 to verse 20 of chapter 2, they are listed according to the name of their fathers, and from verse 21 to verse 34 according to the name of their cities. Those listed according to their cities went to inhabit and re-people their cities of origin, once they had returned to Palestine. The entire people was registered according to their genealogies, as Nehemiah 7: 5 tells us.

*Translator's note: Is Senaah (v. 35) a place or person? (References: Ezra 2; 35, Nehemiah 7: 38:

context suggests place; cf. also "Hossenah" Nehemiah 3: 3 where the contexts suggests a person) If it is a place, it would seem to make more sense to say "v. 35" instead of "v. 34" as the text says.

The priests, belonging to four families of the sons of Aaron, proved themselves zealous to resume their place and functions in the house of God which was about to be built. They numbered 4289 (Ezra 2: 36-39), whereas, out of the three families of the Levites, only one family was represented, and even this family was represented by a number which was quite insufficient.

Don't these facts have something to say to us at the present time? As all Christians are priests whose suited function is to worship God, many of them (although it goes without saying that even this number is too few) feel the need to fill their functions as worshippers in the Assembly of the living God. But how the absence of Levites, whose functions correspond to ministries in the Christian Assembly, is cruelly felt! It is not that there was any lack of people, as we shall see in Ezra 8, but on their part there was indifference, spiritual laziness, love of their own comfort, no doubt, and thus only seventy-four individuals present themselves to escort the priests, the people, and their chiefs! This is certainly one of the characteristic features of the present time just as it was in those days. Those who have received gifts of the Lord for evangelizing, teaching, and feeding the flock of Christ, fear to go forward with the strength which is given them, and exercise their ministry as the Lord has confided it to them. Instead of feeling their responsibility, they transfer it to others and prefer to give them place, rather than to themselves "keep [their] charge". Even if it is not the only motive for the clergy's usurpation in the Church, at least this spiritual laziness favors it to a high degree. Later we shall see what difficulty Ezra had to assemble a few Levites to go up to Jerusalem with him.

The singers, the sons of Asaph, were more numerous than the sons of Levi: the Word mentions 128 of them (Ezra 2: 41). What a precious function it is to sing the praises of God; but do we not often see, in the assemblies of the saints, the role of the "children of Asaph" largely represented in order to dispense with a service which is more exacting and which calls for greater responsibility?

The porters numbered 139; the Nethinim, or subordinate servants of the sanctuary, together with Solomon's servants numbered 392 (v. 58). These modest functions are very valuable in the eyes of the Lord. See how, from verse 43 to verse 57, God complacently registers all the names of their fathers. Likewise today, whether it is a matter of serving tables, of passing the bread and the cup, of taking care of the "upper room", none of this is forgotten by the Lord; the names of those who have kept the charge of this service are registered just as deservedly as others, and we shall see, in more than one case, that the one among the children of God who took the last place, forgetting himself in order to serve others, will occupy a place of honor, whereas a certain remarkable gift, which tended to glorify man rather than Christ, will sit down with confusion in the last place.

In all, the priests, Levites, singers and servants numbered 5022 souls.

Thus the number of people registered was 29,166 (Ezra 2: 1-35; 36-58) but the whole congregation together consisted of 42,360 persons (v. 64). Among them, 652 (v. 60) of the children of Israel could not prove that they were really part of the people. Moreover, a great number of priests "sought their genealogical register, but they were not found; therefore were they, as polluted, removed from the priesthood. And [Zerubbabel] the Tirshatha (*a Persian word: the name given in Ezra and Nehemiah to the governor of Jerusalem under Persian kings*), said to them, that they should not eat of the most holy things, till there stood up a priest with Urim and with Thummim" (vv. 62, 63).

Here we find the first feature which ought to characterize a remnant. In normal times, one was not held accountable to present his genealogy, for it was self-evident, to all, that a priest could not pretend to a place which did not belong to him. The situation was identical in the early days of the

Church: no one dared to join himself to the Christian assembly (Acts 5: 13), because the power of the Holy Spirit presented a considerable barrier to the invasion of the world. In a time of ruin, it is quite different: when foreign elements have broken out in the house of God, the faithful and obliged *to keep close watch in order to oppose any mixture with the world*. In Ezra it is a matter of rebuilding the temple of the Lord, and the service of the house could not be associated with foreign elements. Thus we shall later see the remnant entirely repudiate any alliance with the world, in view of a common work; only here, it is not a question of repulsing elements from without, but of examining those persons who claim to belong to the people of God, in order to know if they can give proof of their origin. The case is the same today: the greatest vigilance is necessary, in order to assure that the life of God is really united to the Christian profession. Those who could not be acknowledged by the assembly of Israel, even although they might indeed be part of the people, ought not to blame anyone but themselves if they were not admitted to the service of the temple. They might well indeed be members of Israel, despite appearances, but why were they not prepared to prove their line of descent? Was this the fault of those who did not recognize them? Ought they not, rather, to blame their own indifference in keeping the proof of their origin?

The priests were doubly guilty. There remained only one resource for them: the coming of a priest with the Urim and Thummim, by means of which he consulted the Lord (Num. 27: 21; 1 Sam. 28: 6). Only God, who knows those who are His, could make manifest those who were really of the priestly family. Until that moment, they must wait and could not "eat of the most holy things". This example also indicates to us the course which the Christian assembly should follow in doubtful cases. Let us wait until we can consult the Lord, before admitting to the Lord's table those who cannot prove their divine origin in the sight of all. A Remnant according to the mind of God will never receive to the supper those who merely make a profession of Christianity, but rather, will receive those who are born of God and are His children by right.

In contrast to verse 43, which speaks of the servants of the sanctuary, verses 64 to 67 tell us of the servants and maid-servants of the *people*, for God does not forget them either. In one way or another, they fulfill their service. Whether it is a matter of washing the feet of the saints, of filling the most humble functions toward those who belong to the Lord, of giving but a cup of water to one of these little ones, God is mindful of it and records it. There were also, among this company, 200 singing men and singing women (v. 65). This singing involves something other than the praise of the holy place, which the sons of Asaph celebrated; the purpose of this singing was also in order to maintain, outside of the context of the set service of worship, the mutual communion of the people of God (Eph. 5: 19; Col. 3: 16).

Lastly, that nothing might be forgotten, God even takes account of the animals (vv. 66, 67), of everything which is useful to His people, and which is helpful to them. These are also carefully counted, without overlooking a single one. What care this numbering speaks to us of! All along the voyage which was to bring them to the house of God, God Himself had watched over His people, had prepared the necessary relief for their fatigue, and had made preparation beforehand for the needs of the weak, the women and the little children. What a God is ours! Shall we seek for a better guide, a better guardian? Is not our Father the Creator and Keeper of all things?

The first characteristic of the remnant, as we have seen, was minute care to avoid receiving any doubtful element into the priesthood, in order to maintain the service of the temple free of defilement. In verses 68 and 69, we find a second characteristic: *zeal for the erection of the house of God*, the devotion which sacrifices its own interests for the work of the Lord. The chief fathers voluntarily give a sum which could be evaluated at two and a half million in our currency (i.e., French francs, therefore

convert to American currency; N.B. one dram = £1.1s or \$4.97). This was little indeed, compared to what the chief fathers had formerly offered for the construction of the temple of Solomon (1 Chr. 29: 6-9), but in a time of extreme poverty, this gift had a great value in the eyes of the Lord of the temple and He, the possessor of all the treasures of the universe, appreciated it, according to the zeal which prompted them to offer it, just as later He esteemed the widow's mite more than the surplus of the rich.

To summarize, the characteristics of the remnant, in these two chapters, are the following:

The faithful accept the condition of humiliation and slavery into which their sins has placed them, and they seek neither to improve this state of things, nor to escape from it. Above all, they desire to preserve those who are part of the house of God free from any profane mixture. Not having the Urim and Thummim, they wait until God reveals His mind to them concerning many matters. They do not pretend to replace divine revelations, which are not granted to them for the moment, by some human arrangement of their own invention. They realize that the extent of their intelligence is indeed small. If the carelessness of some prevents the others from acknowledging them, and if the faithfulness of these others obliges them to exclude the careless ones from priestly service, it is no less true that the Lord knows those that are His, and that the moment will come when He will reveal them so faithfully that not one will be found missing.

In the meanwhile, these faithful ones must walk in the narrow path, without any pretension to the power which they did not possess, and with the feeble resources which the God of mercy had left a their disposition.

But this poverty does not in anyway exclude devotion. The house of God is the great object of the thoughts of the remnant and, from the time of their arrival in the land of promise, they subordinate everything to it. What follows will show us whether this zeal succeeded in maintaining itself.

Ezra 3

The altar and the foundations of the temple.

Our chapter points out a great many other characteristics of the remnant, in addition to the two features mentioned above.

"And when the seventh month* came, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem. Then stood up Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer up burnt-offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God. And they set the altar on its base; for fear was upon them because of the people of the countries. And they offered up burnt-offerings on it to Jehovah, the morning and evening burnt-offerings" (vv. 1-3).

*The month of Ethanim (1 Ki. 8: 2), the month of the dedication of Solomon's temple.

During the seventy years of captivity, this poor people, stricken by the judgment of God, had been deprived of the worship service of the Lord. The temple had been destroyed and all its treasures spoiled; the brazen altar itself had been broken. But as soon as the remnant return to their land, the *altar*, the primary symbol of worship, and the one item of furniture absolutely essential for the existence of the service of worship, is rebuilt.

This is a striking type, designed to instruct us. In Haran, Abraham had no altar; when he crossed the border of Canaan, the altar appeared. When the patriarch went down to Egypt, he lost his altar;

when he returned from Egypt, he recovered it. Thus the altar is intimately related to dwelling in the land of promise. One must belong to the heavenly Canaan in order for worship to be a reality; moreover, one must be practically dwelling there, have taken possession of one's inheritance, and have realized that one is delivered from the power of darkness and transported into a new kingdom, the kingdom of the Son of the Father's love — nothing less than these things is necessary — in order to worship God acceptably. The Church of Christ, unfaithful as she is, has lost these things from sight; but in these final days, have we not been re-awakened so that we might truly serve the Lord and give Him worship? If one asks Christians what this word "worship" means, the greater part show, by their answers, that they have but a feeble idea of its significance. But we will not linger over this subject; let us rather see what worship consisted of for this poor remnant.

In the first place, they were not left to themselves to determine this, for they had the *law of Moses* and the commandments of God. And it is said in verses 2 (translator's note: the text says v. 3, but it is actually v. 2) and 4: "as it is written" and "according to the ordinance". The divine Word instructed them concerning worship according to the law, just as it instructs us today concerning worship according to the Spirit. It is very important to note the role which the Word plays in all this. For the people, the question was not, to know what other were accustomed to do, but rather, what the law of Moses revealed to them about this subject. For this remnant, the Scriptures had recovered their place and importance.

In the second place, the remnant understood that worship was linked to the *altar*. The altar was the center of worship, just as the table of the Lord forms the center of worship for the Christian. The sacrifice was placed on the altar and it was in virtue of this sacrifice that the people worshipped God, because it was through this sacrifice that one might be reconciled and brought into relationship with the Lord.

They built the altar *on its base* [translator's note: v. 3; "base" is *mâkôwn* in Hebrew, a *fixture*, i.e. a *basis*; generally, a *place*, especially an *abode*]. Finding that everything had been destroyed and overthrown at Jerusalem, they might have been satisfied with any place whatsoever for building their altar. And is this not the spectacle which Christendom offers today? Everyone chooses his own base for setting up his altar, under the pretext that since the true temple has been destroyed, we are free to choose the place which suits us best. This was not the case of these faithful souls. They knew the place of the temple, of the court, of the altar, and it was at that place and none other that they built the altar, thus determining the center of gathering and worship for the people of God. They wanted no other place, and they knew of no other place than that one, in days of ruin just as in Israel's most prosperous days. Ornan's threshing floor, on mount Moriah, remained the unique place where worship might be offered up.

Thirdly, please note that this remnant, so poor and feeble in appearance, is not satisfied with an agreement or mutual deference to build the altar on its place. They show forth the unity of the people, represented visibly by the altar, in a practical way. Their entire attitude witnesses to this unity; the people *gather themselves together as one man to Jerusalem*. The distance of their cities does not in any way prevent them from coming to the altar at Jerusalem, and no where else, to demonstrate this unity.

It is the same today at the Lord's table: it is, like the altar of the remnant, the manifestation of the unity of the people of God, finding expression in "one loaf" in which all participate. Little did it matter whether the Jews were few in number; little does it matter if we are only two or three in number: the unity of *all* the people, whether they had returned from captivity or were scattered along the banks of

the rivers of Babylon, or in unknown cities of Persia and Media, was expressed there by the altar set up in the midst of the court. For them, the question was not whether others would follow their example; they had the will of God, proclaimed by Moses, as the basis for their action. The Word bound them; their gathering was an act of *obedience*. They obeyed *before* setting to work on the house, which would come later. For the moment, *worship*, a greater thing than the holy place, the ark, or the throne between the cherubim, was re-established. Is not the situation the same with the gathering of the saints around the memorial of the cross of Christ, the blessed place where the Lamb of God was offered up: the Lamb that was slain, whom we worship, as such, in glory?

But in the establishment of the altar there was more than an act of obedience. This remnant was weakness itself; the hostile nations of these lands surrounded them and were quite capable of inspiring the remnant with fear. "They set the altar on its base; for fear was upon them because of the people of the countries" (v. 3). Where could they go to find safety and protection from their enemies? Nowhere else but before the God whom they had come to seek at His altar. Thus, by faith, they realized the presence of the Lord in His house which they were about to build. God could dwell there where the altar was found. From that moment on, what did they have to fear? They might say: "For in the day of evil he will hide me in his pavilion; in the secret of his tent will he keep me concealed: he will set me high upon a rock. And now shall mine head be lifted up above mine enemies round about me: and will I offer in his tent sacrifices of shouts of joy; I will sing, yea, I will sing psalms unto Jehovah" (Ps. 27: 5, 6).

There is yet another circumstance worth noting: it was during the seventh month that all the people gathered together from all their cities to Jerusalem (v. 1). The feast of the new moon, inaugurated by the blowing of trumpets (Lev. 23: 23; Num. 10: 10; Ps. 81: 3) took place on the first day of this seventh month. This day was remarkably appropriate for the condition of the people returned from captivity and for grace which God had shown them. Israel had lost divine blessing through their own fault; the light of the glory of the Lord which the people ought to have reflected, just as the moon reflects the sun, had disappeared; but now the new moon, an image of the restored people, had begun to reappear. The full splendor of this luminary was not yet visible, but this first quarter moon presaged the future manifestation of the glory of the people of God. What more characteristic feast could have been chosen? This feast was a day of rest and jubilation (Lev. 23: 23-24). No sorrow was to spoil its beauty, and nevertheless the fear of the surrounding nations was on them! From the first day of this seventh month, the altar was built and the morning and evening burnt sacrifice was offered on it (vv. 3, 6); not the sacrifice for sin, but the burnt offering, the true image of worship; and the people were to continue to offer it, without any interruption, until the temple was completed.

Should it not be the same today, when there are such striking analogies to the book of Ezra? Should not the people of God have their altar today also, and on that altar should they not offer up a continual sacrifice of praise to God, the fruit of lips which confess His name; and should they not do these things until the "holy temple in the Lord" is completed at His coming? (Heb. 13: 10, 15; Eph. 2: 21; 1 Cor. 11: 26).

Note another remarkable point: the tenth day of the seventh month, the *great day of atonement* when the people were to *afflict their souls* (Lev. 23: 26-32), is not mentioned here. In a time yet to come for the Jewish people, in Zechariah 12: 10-14, this day will not be omitted. Then there will be a great mourning at Jerusalem, "as the mourning of Hadad-rimmon, in the valley of Megiddon". It will then be time for this same people, whom the book of Ezra depicts returned to their land, to receive again, as the king of glory, the Messiah, whom they had rejected and crucified. The remnant of the future, will be unable to celebrate the feast of tabernacles (Zech 14: 16) until after this great day of

atonement.

But this was not the case in the book of Ezra. The people had been partially restored, in view of receiving the Messiah when He should present Himself to Israel. The question of His rejection had not yet arisen, rather, it was a matter of receiving Him as the Lord's anointed. Consequently, it was not yet a matter of national humiliation, as expressed by the great day of atonement, but simply of welcoming Him when He should come. In view of this moment, should there have been anything but joy in the hearts of this people in the book of Ezra? Here we are not speaking of the mission of John the Baptist, the baptism of repentance, which was to immediately precede the Messiah's coming to Israel and which did not correspond to the great day of atonement.

Therefore, in Ezra, the *feast of tabernacles* (v. 4), the feast of the fifteenth day of the seventh month (Lev. 23: 33), immediately follows the feast of the new moon. On this feast there was *unalloyed* rejoicing (Deut. 16: 13-15). This feast was to take place at the time of entering Canaan, after deliverance from Egypt and after passing through the wilderness. It was celebrated as a memorial of this passage, but no longer under tents set up beneath the sun's intense heat in the midst of the desert sand; the rest of the promised land had come; the fresh foliage of the attractive trees of this good land henceforth formed the tents beneath which a joyful people recalled the ups and downs of former days. Here, in Ezra, with the feast of tabernacles, we witness, so to speak, a recovered Canaan, while waiting for the appearance of the promised Messiah, and it was as if the people had never before entered the promised land. We shall see, in Nehemiah 8: 9-15, when we take up this book, the people celebrate this same feast in a *complete* way for the first time, whereas, in Ezra, we find, rather, the place which the feast of tabernacles occupied in the restoration of the people.

For believers in our day, whom one might call the Remnant of the Christian dispensation, this feast corresponds to the joy of the heavenly position of the people of God, realized as a completely new thing, and discovered in the Word, after centuries of spiritual captivity during which this position had either been forgotten or lost sight of. As in Ezra 3, it could be brought back to light only with the construction of the altar, that is to say, with the realization of worship. With worship, the heavenly position of the Church must necessarily be understood. Believers do not have an earthly religion, like the Jewish people. Worship introduces them into heaven, even when everything is in ruin around them and the Church, like the temple at the beginning of Ezra, is no more than a heap of debris. Thus Ezra is careful to tell us: "But the foundation of the temple of Jehovah was not [yet] laid" (v. 6)

A third blessing yet awaits this poor remnant. In the second year of their arrival at the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, in the second month (v. 8), the Levites (who, as we have seen, represent the ministry for us) are established according to the mind of God, in order to oversee the construction of the temple. Here, as in building the altar, the people show themselves to be united, by standing up "as one [man]" (v.9). There is no discord among them concerning the establishment of ministry according to the Word. This is also a recovered blessing. The epistle to the Ephesians which brings to light our position in Christ in the heavenlies, also reveals the role and character of the gifts of Christ to His Church (Eph. 4).

After these three things: the altar or worship, the feast of tabernacles or the enjoyment of the heavenly position, and the establishment of the Levites or ministry, the remnant turn their attention to the *foundation of the house*.

Indeed, the re-establishing of worship was not everything to this poor people: they must recommence the work of building the house of God. Whatever destruction this house may have suffered, however apparently thorough that destruction may have been (as the destruction which

Nebuchadnezzar executed), it is always considered in the Word as *the house*. It has but one history, one existence in the eyes of God, through its various phases of construction or overthrow. Rebuilt, it is not a new temple, in God's eyes, but rather the same temple with different glories. This is why it is said in Haggai (Hag. 2: 9), concerning the temple, rebuilt by the remnant in the time of Zerubbabel: "The latter glory of *this house*" (an allusion to the millennial temple which the Lord will fill with His glory) "shall be greater than the former" (an allusion to the temple of Solomon).

This remark is very important for the present time. In the midst of the ruins of Christendom (which ought to have been the Church of Christ, but which abandoned the testimony and united itself to the world), Christians who consider this state and humble themselves concerning it, are nevertheless called on to work at the construction of the house of God. It is not that God calls on them to raise up *a new house*, for there will never be *but one* house of God, one Church of Christ. Christians convinced of this truth will recoil at the pretension to build *churches*, which Christ will never approve of or recognize. Christ has *one* Church, *one* body, *one* Bride whom He loved and for whom He gave Himself; He has a house here on earth, and it is on Himself, the chief cornerstone, that the whole building grows to be a holy temple in the Lord, an habitation of God through the Spirit.

All this is *His* work, but He has also entrusted this work to the *responsibility* of His people for He does not add materials, living stones, by Himself alone, but we are also counted upon to bring material appropriate to the holiness of this building. These materials have been, in the course of time, mixed with wood, hay and stubble (destructive doctrines or persons who are strangers to the house of God), whereas the materials should have been only gold, silver and precious stones (1 Cor. 3), and the building has been ruined, like its antitype, the temple at Jerusalem; but that does not in any way prevent this construction from continuing to be entrusted to the people of God. They are responsible to complete it, but they have failed, and nevertheless, they are called on to work as though everything was in its normal condition.

In Zerubbabel's time, the very *foundation* of the temple had been destroyed and must be laid once again (vv. 6 and 10). Could this foundation differ from the foundation of Solomon's temple? In no way: the Levites appointed to "superintend the work of the house" and "the workmen in the house of God" (vv. 8, 9), assisted by the priests, were to do everything according to the directions given by David, king of Israel, at the beginning (v. 10). Likewise today, whoever the workmen may be, no other foundation can be laid but Jesus Christ. On this rock, the Lord said, I will build my Church; and, on his side, the apostle Paul, as a *wise master builder*, performed this task, laying the same foundation (1 Cor. 3: 10), so that no one has the right to do otherwise.

In the time of the book of Ezra, as at the present day, the foundation could not be new, but after centuries of abandonment, it was re-discovered and laid, as the only one capable of supporting the house, the Assembly of God.

Here we must also remark, that the re-building of the house of God was inseparable from the testimony given to its ruin and to the ruin of the people of God. Everything which the remnant accomplished, they did "according to the grant that they had of Cyrus king of Persia" (v. 7). They were subjected to the nations because of their sins, and were to be continually conscious of their state, until the glorious restoration of the people through the promised Messiah. This is what the Maccabees so little understood at a later time, and this is what irritated the proud spirit of the people in the times of Jesus, so that they dared say to Him: "we... have never been under bondage to any one!" (John 8: 33). The consciousness of our ruin should characterize us today, as it characterized the people in the times of Ezra. We cannot and should not deny it or shrug the burden of it off our shoulders, but rather, we

must bear the humiliation of this ruin, all the while we replace the house of God on its only real foundation, Christ, with the apostles and prophets who gave witness to Him.

The priests and all the people celebrate a feast of praise at the moment when the foundations of the temple are laid once again (vv. 10-13), and this fact, in addition to the establishment of the altar, is of every importance for us. In the midst of the most complete ruin, two things remain unchanged, the work of Christ and His person, Christ the altar and Christ the foundation, Christ our salvation and Christ, the One upon whom we are built forever, Christ the object of worship and of the unceasing praise of His own. In the dark times which we pass through, in humiliation and deserved reproach which are our lot, we can nevertheless sing the hymn of the future, for He has not changed. Here we see a remnant sing the song of millennial glory in the midst of the desolation of their history and among the ruins of Jerusalem: "They sang alternately together in praising and giving thanks to Jehovah: For he is good; for his loving-kindness [endureth] for ever toward Israel" (v. 11). He is the same, His love never changes, and it will be fully manifested when He introduces His loved people into His own glory.

Nevertheless, in the midst of this joy, sorrow and pain could not be wanting; and this is another common characteristic of the remnant of that time and the remnant today. The temple which they built could not be compared to Solomon's temple; the present day Church can not be set parallel to the Church as she was when she was formed, by the power of the Holy spirit, as a witness to Christ gone up in glory. Joy could well be unalloyed in those who were still young and who could not remember the past. They were present at a sort of resurrection of the people, and they saw the marvelous intervention of the grace of God in this. Who would want to hinder them from rejoicing? But the priests, the Levites, and the chief fathers wept, because, being in closer communion with God, they were more conscious of the dishonor brought upon His name, and the old men wept, because they had experienced better times.

This mixture of joy and "[weeping] with a loud voice" rose up before God, so intermixed, so to speak, that one could not distinguish one from the other, and "the noise was heard afar off". Likewise, those today who have at heart building the house of God and laying its destroyed foundations, should make known, through their attitude, that a true humiliation over their state cannot be separated from the joy they experience at celebrating together the work and person of Christ as the only foundation of present and future blessing.

Ezra 4

The work interrupted.

Up to this point the people had shown themselves to be faithful in their witness, and the Lord had helped them and encouraged them. But this did not suit the enemy; he cannot stand to see the work of God prosper in this world, and immediately seeks to spoil it. He has more than one means to attain this goal. Here God characterizes the instruments of Satan with this word: "the *adversaries* of Judah" (v. 1). They belonged to the nations which the kings of Assyria, according to their custom, had transported to other countries after subjecting them. Esar-haddon, the son of Sennacherib, following the politic of Shalmaneser (2 Kings 17: 3), had replaced the unsubdued tribes of Israel, who were led into captivity, by people from widely different lands, whom he made to dwell in the cities of Samaria and in the land located west of the Euphrates (v. 10, see footnote for "river" JND]. The second book of Kings (2 Kings 17: 33) informs us about the religious condition of these nations. They kept their gods, at the same time they acknowledged the God of Israel and, according to the language of the Bible,

"these nations feared Jehovah, and served their graven images" (2 Kings 17: 41).

This mixture, which could not be likened to pure idolatry, makes us think of the amalgam which is called Christendom, in whatever form it may present itself, from the time of Roman and Greek Mariolatry, to the much more subtle forms of Protestant Christendom, where the worship of the true God is associated with the moral darkness of the world, and where profession has no relationship to that which ought to characterize the people of God.

These people, descended from an idolatrous mixture, offer to build together with the people, but what materials could they bring to the house of God? Certainly, their work could not be accepted by the people, if they would remain faithful. They come near and say: "We would build with you; for we seek your God, as ye; and we have sacrificed to him since the days of Esar-haddon king of Assyria, who brought us up hither" (v. 2). Doesn't this have some analogy with that which we see in our own day, and are the present-day children of God as faithful as this remnant of former days? Do they understand that the work of God cannot support, in those to whom it is entrusted, any mixture with the world? It is not the affair of any but those whose genealogy can be proved and who are part of the Israel of God to build something for the Lord in this world. Listen to the immediate response of the remnant: "Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house to our God, but we alone will build to Jehovah the God of Israel, as king Cyrus, the king of Persia, has commanded us" (v. 3). In speaking this way, they show no spiritual pride, for they acknowledge their subjection to the king of the Gentiles, as the consequence of their unfaithfulness, but they have understood that *they alone* are called to this work, for they cannot, in any way, associate with the religious *character* of the people who surround them. Although they live in the midst of them, honor their leaders and obey their king, nevertheless any association with these nations is prohibited; they are horrified at the religious corruption and repudiate it.

The enemy had presented himself as a friend; this called for special vigilance and caution. But these men, who were rejected, very soon show their true character quite openly: "And the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building; and hired counselors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia" (vv. 4, 5). The people had been firm and had resisted wiles and trickery, attributes of the ancient serpent; but they become frightened when the adversary appears as a roaring lion, forgetting that their enemy is a defeated enemy, and that he would have departed from anyone who would stand up to him.

But the hatred of their enemies does not stop there. They become the *accusers* of this poor, oppressed people. Their letter to Artaxerxes proves this: "Be it known to the king that the Jews who came up from thee unto us have come to Jerusalem; they are building the rebellious and the bad city, and they complete the walls and join up the foundations. Be it known therefore unto the king, that, if this city be built and the walls be completed, they will they not pay tribute, tax, and toll, and in the end it will bring damage to the kings. Now, since we eat the salt of the palace, and it was not right for us to see the king's injury, therefore have we sent and informed the king, that search may be made in the book of the annals of thy fathers: so shalt thou find in the book of the annals and know that this city is a rebellious city, which has done damage to kings and provinces, and that they have raised sedition within the same of old time, for which cause this city was destroyed. We inform the king that if this city be built and its walls be completed, by this means thou shalt have no portion on this side of the river" (vv. 12-16).

Notice that they do not accuse the people of rebuilding the temple and do not say even one word

about it, but rather, they speak of the *city*. One may easily discover their object. They wished to prevent the remnant from *gathering together*, because such a gathering would deprive the enemy of any power over the people of God: "If this city be built and its walls be completed, by this means thou shalt have no portion on this side of the river", whereas, scattered, they would easily become the prey of their adversaries. Likewise, Satan opposes the gathering of the children of God today; and if he doesn't succeed in corrupting the sheep, he causes them to fall out, ravishes them, and scatters them.

The adversaries of those days present the king with political reasons for preventing the reuniting of the people. Such motives had great weight with this crafty, usurping monarch and, in fact, were the only motives which might draw his concern. The king notes that in former days Jerusalem once had powerful kings and that they would overshadow him if their throne was to be re-established, and he also notes that the city had always shown itself to be rebellious toward any foreign yoke. This is enough to stir him to put a stop to the work. As soon as they received his authorization, the adversaries of Israel "went up in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews, and made them cease by force and power" (v. 23).

And so, these four hostile forces reunite here in order to ruin the work of God: ruse, intimidation, accusation, and violence. Only faith could have resisted them; but the people were totally lacking in faith, and the result was that the construction of the house suffered an interruption of fifteen years.

Ezra 5 and Ezra 6

Revival and the Construction of the temple

Ezra 5

In the preceding chapters, we have seen the activity of the remnant of Judah. They were composed, in large part, of people who were able to prove their genealogy. Those who were not able to do so were by that very fact excluded from the priesthood as being profane, but God recognized them nevertheless, as a whole so to speak, and, in the presence of their enemies, they bore certain features which distinguished them from the surrounding nations.

If we wish to look for an analogy with this state of things in the midst of Christendom, we would say that the Reformation offers a similar example. The Protestant movement, which came out of an almost idolatrous context, shone at its beginning with the features which the presence of true believers impressed upon it, and, without pushing the comparison further, under the influence of the word of God, there were precious truths rediscovered and brought to light, which greatly influenced the life and behavior of the people of God. But the wiles of the enemy and his violence seduced or intimidated the greater number of those involved in the movement, so that the edification of the house of God was hindered, and then brought to a stop. The epistle to Sardis (Rev. 3: 1-6) describes the state into which the Church, come out from popery, fell following the divine work which had caused it to shine so brightly at the beginning.

In Ezra, we have seen, after the first burst of enthusiasm, when the people were as one man, they lack confidence in divine power and the work stops. Fifteen years go by; only the foundations of the temple have been laid; construction has been absolutely interrupted. During these long years, the people must necessarily do something, and when the Lord no longer has His place in the heart, what occupies a person if not his own personal interests? This is what the prophet Haggai tells us. The people built paneled houses for themselves, while the house of God was devastated (Hag. 1: 4). But

spiritual inactivity had yet more disastrous results: the people allied themselves with the nations to whom they had said: "Ye have nothing to do with us..." (Hag. 4: 3), and we will see the results of this in Ezra 9 and 10.

Nevertheless the grace which had delivered them was not paralyzed by their conduct, and in Ezra 5 we see a *revival* produced by the Spirit of God. There had been revivals previously under Hezekiah and Josiah, as we have seen when meditating on the second book of Kings*, before the sentence of Lommi, which was pronounced over Israel (Hosea 1: 9), was actually executed. Actually these were revivals of the kings, the leaders of the people. The people benefited from them, without their conscience being reached, as a whole. But here, after the chastening of captivity and re-integration of the remnant of Judah, the revival takes on another character. This is a revival of the people, and moreover, it is not a question, as it was previously, of separation from idols and purifying the temple, but of *rebuilding* the temple when it is nothing but a heap of ruins.

*Meditations on the second book of Kings, by H. R.

This is also the character of the present-day testimony in the midst of Christendom. It is a question of bringing materials to the house of God. God has brought back to light the truth that this house, the Church, the assembly of the living God, is of immense importance in the eyes of Christ. Despite the ruin, He considers His Assembly such as He desires her to be, even though, through the unfaithfulness of the people of God, she has completely disappeared as a public testimony. Her existence, and more than this, her unity, are just as real — not to the eyes of the world, but to the eyes of God — as when, like Solomon's temple, she was built and grew to be a holy temple in the Lord. *It is the same house*. In Ezra also (Ezra 5), the remnant considers it from this point of view: "We... build the house that was built many years ago; and a great king of Israel built and completed it" (v. 11) they say. And: "Nebuchadnezzar... destroyed *this house*" (v. 12); and: "Cyrus gave orders to build *this house of God*" (v. 13); and again: "Then came the same Sheshbazzar, [and] laid the foundation of the house of God which is at Jerusalem; and since that time even until now has it been in building, and it is not completed" (v. 16).

Building the house of God is also the character of the revival which the Lord has instigated in our days. Already more than one hundred years have passed since this great task of the people of God has been brought back to light. Has it stirred every heart of every believer? It is in nowise a question, we repeat, of building a new Church, for she exists, built by God Himself, and grows to be a holy temple in the Lord; and, in order that she may be so, it is enough that God sees her. But God expects His people to make her visible to all, by bringing materials suitable for her construction. The evangelist, pastors and doctors are the agents used by the Holy Spirit to build the Assembly, but we would greatly illusion ourselves if we should think that only evangelizing adds souls to the building. It is one of the principal instruments, but this work requires the cooperation of all the gifts; and much more, each witness of Christ is responsible to bring noble and living material to the house of God. Our unfaithfulness has scattered these materials instead of gathering them, so that they are not visible except to the eyes of God. Today it belongs to the faithful to discern these materials and to set them in their proper place, so that the house of God may once again become visible in the world, even if it only be by means of a few rows of stones which indicate what she ought to be.

This was the *testimony* to which the remnant of Judah was called. How many times we hear that evangelizing is the testimony, and the result of this idea, which is fundamentally wrong, is that one believes he has put his hand to the house of God, when souls are converted, and then left helpless in the midst of human systems which are foreign to the Assembly of God.

Dear readers, think about these things. In the days in which we live we have something to build, and this is not those broken-down buildings which are called churches, which God does not recognize, and for which the heart of Christ has no sympathy. He loved the *Assembly*; by giving Himself for her, He has shown how precious she was to Him. Is she as precious to us as she is to Him? In that case, we will have a large heart which will raise us above narrow, sectarian views, for a heart which burns with love cannot be satisfied except in seeing all the redeemed gathered in the unity of the body of Christ. And, even though this task cannot be realized, as it was at the beginning of the Church's history, God will take account of His servants and their activity to proclaim and realize practically that there is only one House, one Assembly of the living God, recognized by Him in this world.

"Now the prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews that were in Judah and Jerusalem; in the name of the God of Israel" (Ezra 5: 1). In order to produce this revival, two prophets are enough here. They were the bearers and the representatives of the word of God for the people. By their means, the Word, brought again to light according to the power of the Holy Spirit, reaches the conscience. Later we shall see, when Ezra comes on the scene (Ezra 7 to 10), this same Word presented to souls without any signs of prophetic power. Ezra who brings the word claims only to establish the faithful in the truths which Scripture presents, so that their walk may be conformed to it. The two prophets on the one hand and Ezra on the other hand present two different activities of the word of God. After re-awaking a soul, it establishes and nourishes the soul, and it is through the word that souls are sanctified so as to behave in a manner worthy of God. A period of revival which is not followed by scriptural teaching will be short-lived and will be extinguished, without leaving any other impression of its occurrence except souls individually saved and brought to the knowledge of Christ. This is an inestimable blessing, no doubt, but one which does not exhaust the treasures of Christian blessing. And so we cannot insist enough on the importance of doctrine for the progress of revived souls.

The immediate result of the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah was that the leaders of the people, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, took their words to heart. "[They] rose up, and began to build the house of God which is at Jerusalem; and with them were the prophets of God who helped them" (v. 2). The leaders do not wait for a unanimous assent, nor do they try to provoke any common action, when it was a matter of building the house. This will always be the case. The only way of stirring up the activity of faith in others is to engage in this activity oneself, with a heart deeply impressed by that which is due the Lord and our responsibility toward Him. We may be only two or three, walking with an undivided heart in the path of devotion for the Assembly of God, but we may be sure that our zeal will bear its fruit. Only two or three? you will say. Yes, Haggai and Zechariah, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, alone, represented the true Spirit of Christ at this moment. In brief, in them we see royalty, the priesthood and the Spirit of prophecy at work for the blessing of all. These two men, and with them the prophets of God, began to build. Soon others would associate themselves in building. The people sided with their leaders against the enemy: "And *they* said to them after this manner: What are the names of the men that build this building? But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews" (vv. 4, 5).

Since the time of the first opposition to the temple's erection, new men, Tatnai, Shethar-boznai and their companions (v. 6), had replaced the ancient enemies of the people, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and their companions (Ezra 4: 7). In Nehemiah 6: 1 the individuals involved change again: here it is Sanballat, Tobijah and Geshem the Arabian, with their companions who oppose the work. One group of men succeeds the other in their more or less violent hatred against the work of God, but the opposition remains, because the enemy who uses all these instruments has not changed. Oh! If only faith would never allow itself to be stopped by the obstacles which the agents of Satan raise up! If only

we well understood that the work of God cannot be destroyed, because God remains over and above all! He may allow our unbelief and laxity to slow down this work and interrupt it, and He may allow this in order to teach us to know ourselves, to judge ourselves and to humble ourselves, but nevertheless His work will be accomplished. His house, even though it be destroyed, remains, and whereas hostile men follow one another in rapid succession, men like Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and their companions remain until they have finished the work to which they were called, and until new instruments, like Ezra and Nehemiah, have been raised up to impress a new character on the work.

But already the testimony belonging to this revival, which was provoked by the prophets, has not entirely the same character as that seen in Ezra 3 and Ezra 4. In *some* measure, it could be compared to the evangelizing which accompanies Christianity. Here the remnant no longer proclaims only, as in Ezra 4: 1, 3, "Jehovah the God of Israel", but "the God of the heavens and the earth" (Ezra 5: 11, 12); and the temple is not merely "the temple to Jehovah the God of Israel" (Ezra 4: 1), but "the house of God" (Ezra 5: 11, 13, 15, 16, 17). These terms clearly speak of God, as He reveals Himself to the nations, and of Christ's millennial title. The future temple at Jerusalem will not be established for the twelve tribes alone, for the Gentiles will have their part in it, and the nations with their kings will flow up to worship "the God of the heavens and the earth". Here the people of the Lord set themselves over against the nations, as serving the God which the nations ought to serve, and, in the same way, in our day, we present our Father to the world, as "our Savior god, who desires that all men should be saved" (1 Tim. 2: 3,4). *In this sense*, I would call the revival of Ezra 5, an evangelical revival.

If the people, thus taken to task by their enemies, openly confesses the name and character of their God, it is in no way with any feeling of superiority over those who surround them. The people do not attempt to minimize their guilt, but rather, they recognize before the nations, that they are under God's judgment. If the faithful are "servants of the God of the heavens" (v. 11), they confess that they have been justly punished for their transgressions: "But after that our fathers had provoked the God of the heavens to wrath, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, and he destroyed this house, and carried the people away unto Babylon" (v. 12). Their subjection to the nations was the chastisement of their iniquity (vv. 13-15). Does not this attitude also suit the guilty Church, responsible for what was entrusted to her? Today, as then, God asks of His servants that their testimony, in order that it may be effective, be above all the testimony of their ruin.

Here let us add a remark concerning the tactic used by the people's enemy. Under Artaxerxes, the false Smerdis (Ezra 4), who had a major interest in avoiding revolts against his usurped power, the opponents invoke political motives for stopping the work of God. This monarch would hardly have been moved by religious questions, but it was very important to him that the people be prevented from re-unifying themselves and from defending this re-unification in a fortified capital. Therefore the enemies write to the king, saying that "the Jews... have come to Jerusalem; they are building the rebellious and the bad city, and they complete the walls and join up the foundations" (Ezra 4: 12). Artaxerxes gives his orders in consequence of this message.

Under Darius, the Persian, their tactic has changed. Darius, like other monarchs of Persian origin, detested Babylonian idolatry, but at the same time he granted the countries under his domination the right to each have their own special form of idolatry. He acknowledged the true God, as we shall see in Ezra 6, and feared Him in a certain measure. Therefore the accusers of the Jews believe that they will strike a responsive cord, by drawing attention to the construction of the temple and the religious interests of the kingdom. Did Cyrus indeed allow this reconstruction as the Jews pretend? The enemies hide their hostility under the appearance of indifference and almost of tolerance. If the edict given by Cyrus did not exist, or could not be found, they could expect an order from the king to

command the work to stop. Their great pre-occupation is to stay on good terms with the power of the world, for the name of God has, in fact, no value to their hearts or consciences. "Let the king send his pleasure to us concerning this matter", they say (v. 17).

Ezra 6

God particularly favors the revival which He has provoked, while at the same time He causes the remnant to become more and more aware of the ruin caused by their unfaithfulness. Darius, the Persian, supports the Jews and pronounces a fair sentence, which is moreover based on the fact that, according to "the law of the Medes and Persians...", that no decree nor statute which the king establisheth may be changed" (Dan 6: 15). In all this, we can see providence of God, watching over His people. The edict of Cyrus is found at Achmetha, in the province of the Medes and not at Babylon (v. 2), which proves that, without divine intervention, even the most scrupulous research would have been in vain. If Darius does not go so far as to proclaim, like the humbled Nebuchadnezzar, that the Most High rules over the kingdoms of men, nevertheless he does acknowledge the God of heaven, and he recognizes the temple at Jerusalem as the house of God (Ezra 6: 9, 10, 3, 7, 8). He decrees dimensions which his own intelligence select, because they no longer correspond to the symbolical figures of the early temple (v. 3; 1 Kings 6: 2), and so more than one thought from the mind of God remains as though buried beneath the new figures. Darius also recognizes that the prayers of these despised and humbled people are effective on behalf of the king and his sons (v. 10); he uses the authority entrusted to him to punish those who would oppose the will of God; and lastly, he solemnly calls on the God who dwells at Jerusalem to execute vengeance against those who oppose Him: "And the God that has caused his name to dwell there overthrow every king and people that shall put forth their hand to alter [or] to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem" (v. 12). The adversaries, who have no respect for the people of God, hasten to conform to the king's edict, for the fear of man fills their hearts, but God uses everything, even this fear, in order to carry out His plans of grace for the protection of His own.

The elders among the Jews build and prosper through the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah. They complete the temple, not only according to the commandment of the God of Israel, but also according to the commandment of the sovereign rulers of Persia (v. 14). This is the special character of this revival produced in the midst of humiliation and in conditions of subjection to the Gentiles. The work of the temple had been interrupted for fifteen years, from the time of the second year of Cyrus to the second year of Darius, the Persian (Ezra 4: 24; Hag. 1: 1). Four years later the house of God was completed (v. 15). How disastrous are the delays caused by the fear of man and lack of confidence in the Lord, which is the necessary outcome of the fear of man!

In the month of Adar, the twelfth month (which corresponds to our month of March), the dedication of the house takes place, but the house is no longer, as we have already pointed out, built according to its first dimensions, which were divine. This dedication is celebrated in a very feeble way, compared to the dedication of Solomon, a glorious memory, but in spite of this, joy fills the hearts of the people, for once again, God causes "his name to dwell" (v. 12) in this restored house in a publicly approved way. Not that His glory returns to it, nor His throne between the cherubim, but His spiritual presence cannot be lacking when the center of gathering of His people is acknowledged. Nineteen years previously, at the time when the altar was built, they had shown their unity; now, at the dedication of the temple, they realize this blessed truth: that the Lord is in their midst. The people consecrate, so to speak, their unity by His presence, but here again their unity bears the marks of their sin and ruin. They offer twelve he-goats as a sin offering, according to the number of tribes of Israel

(v. 17). No tribe is excluded from the public confession of sin expressed by the sacrifice. We no longer find, as at the time of Elijah, an altar of twelve stones expressing the unity of the people, but rather, we find twelve he-goats offered on the altar for the expiation of a common sin. Thus they acknowledge their solidarity and equality in sin. The sin of Judah and Benjamin, to which tribes these transported people belong, is just as great in their eyes as the sin of the other ten tribes and it requires the same expiation. In these circumstances, they have recourse only to the Word, to that which "is written in the book of Moses" (v. 18) in order to organize their service.

Does not all this speak to us of the position of believers today? It is our place to acknowledge the sin of the Church and to bear the responsibility for it before God, without thinking of casting it off onto others. Our present-day privileges are: to seek the presence of God in the midst of His own who gather to His name, and not to pretend to completely restore what we have ruined; to hold to the word of God alone for the establishment and maintenance of order in the Assembly; to rejoice, in the midst of our great poverty, at having the Holy and True for us and with us in our humiliation.

In addition to these blessings, the remnant discover yet other fresh blessings. The dedication had taken place in the twelfth month; in the following month, the month of Abib (April), the first month of the new year, the people celebrate the Passover. They again find the order of the feasts, as instituted by God, as soon as a complete order — the altar, the temple, the gathering and unity of the people, and the presence of the Lord in their midst — is recovered. In Ezra 3, after having built the altar, they had celebrated the feast of Tabernacles with burnt offerings, and that was legitimate, because they had recovered their dwelling place in Canaan. Here they keep the Passover. The Passover was the memorial of the sacrifice in virtue of which Israel had been preserved from the judgment of God on the one hand and delivered from the bondage of Egypt on the other hand. For us, Christians, this feast corresponds to the memorial of the death of Christ, of our deliverance and the blessings of the new covenant in His blood. This memorial is celebrated on the first day of the week, the day of resurrection, which is "the beginning of months" (Ex. 12: 2).

The priests and Levites had purified themselves "as one [man]" (v. 20a); they were all pure (v. 20b), and so, in a proper condition to celebrate the Passover. They realized that they could not bring impurity to this holy, commemorative meal, and, just as they had been unanimous in building the altar, and overseeing the work and laying the foundations of the temple, so they are now unanimous in purifying themselves "and all such as had separated themselves to them from the filthiness of the nations of the land, to seek Jehovah the God of Israel" (v. 21).

This ought always to be the character of the testimony of the remnant in the midst of ruin. They realize that defilement cannot be allowed at the Lord's table and that the world has no place there; they realize that the supper cannot take place without self-judgment: "Let a man prove himself, and thus eat of the bread, and drink of the cup" (1 Cor. 11: 28).

Lastly, they "kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy; for Jehovah had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel" (v. 22). This feast of unleavened bread is a type of complete, perpetual sanctification, followed for a period of seven days (the number of fullness, the image of the entire course of our life, of a life devoted to the One who delivered us by His death and to the One to whom we belong) This feast is a figure for the collective and individual sanctification, spoken of in 2 Corinthians 6: 17 to 7: 1. The restored remnant celebrates this feast *with joy*, as they had done at the feast of tabernacles and at the dedication of the foundation and at the dedication of the house (Ezra 3: 13; Ezra 6: 16, 22). In this respect, the feast differed from what was said of it in the law of Moses:

"Seven days shalt thou eat unleavened bread with it, *bread of affliction*; for thou camest forth out of the land of Egypt in haste" (Deut. 16: 3). Here, in the midst of all these recovered blessings, there is no room for any sentiment but joy.

The remnant of the captivity were not the only ones who celebrated the feast. Among the people, who had remained in the land during the captivity, "all such as had separated themselves to them from the filthiness of the nations of the land, to seek Jehovah the God of Israel" (v. 21) took part in this solemn feast. Without forming part of the testimony, properly speaking, they came to associate themselves with true practical holiness. And so they had part in the memorial and the feast.

This truth is of great importance for the present day. All Christians separated from the world and from the lifeless profession which surrounds us, have the right to the Lord's table and are received with joy there by their brothers.

Despite so many blessings, the resources of the people, whether for offerings, or for service, were very much diminished (compare 1 Kings 8: 63), but this did not in any way hinder the order of service. For this order, they had an infallible authority, to which they could always have recourse: that which "is written in the book of Moses"; in other words, the word of God (vv. 17, 18).

Ezra 7

Ezra

Here we enter on a new period in our history. Forty-seven years have passed since the dedication of the temple, approximately sixty-eight years from the time of the decree given by Cyrus. Ahasuerus (also known by the name of Xerxes), the monarch referred to in the book of Esther, the son of the Darius the Great (Hystaspis) mentioned in Ezra 5 and Ezra 6, had succeeded his father during this interval, and he had been followed on the throne by Artaxerxes his son (Artaxerxes Longimanus), who is spoken of in this chapter.

In Ezra 5, the revival had been characterized by the power of the prophetic word, producing a renewal of energy in the people, who had long since abandoned the work of the house of God. Ezra 5 and Ezra 6 tell us of the results of this revival.

Now that the first work was completed, the people is called to taste its fruit in peace. Will their spiritual level be maintained in these new circumstances? No, times come when this level declines rapidly. The world infiltrates; profane alliances, as we shall see at the end of this book, are tolerated and weaken the moral fiber. Evil was still hidden in the times when Ezra was raised up, for it was his presence, with new uncontaminated elements, which revealed the evil present.

Where, then, can one find a resource against this spiritual decline and its results? There is but one resource: *the word of God*. God raises up Ezra to teach the people the law of Moses and to remind them of its importance. It is not a question of new revelations here, as when Haggai and Zechariah spoke to the people, but simply of bringing the "statutes and ordinances" (v. 10) contained in "the law of Jehovah" to light again and of applying them to the conscience.

Let us not forget that this is also our only safeguard in the present day, and our only means of restoration. The Lord says, "To this man will I look, to the afflicted and contrite in spirit, and *who trembleth at my word*." (Isa. 66: 2).

Ezra was, in every respect, remarkable as chosen of God to fulfill this mission. In the first place

(vv. 1-5), we find his genealogy which presents no gap. He was of the priestly race and through his ancestors and their virtues (the faithfulness of a Zadok, the zeal of a Phinehas), he had his origin in "Aaron the chief priest".

Should not the case be the same today for the ministers of the Word? Their persons, their works, and their conduct should clearly show that their "all [their] springs are in [Christ]" (Ps. 87: 7), the true high priest. It should be evident to the eyes of all who their Leader is and from whom they have received life.

Ezra was "a ready scribe of the law of Moses, which Jehovah the God of Israel had given" (v. 6). God had prepared him beforehand, as a special gift, to be the leader of His people, but that did not suffice to qualify him to exercise his ministry: "Ezra had directed his heart to seek the law of Jehovah, and to do it" (v. 10). He prepared his heart to *seek* it first of all, and then to *do* it, for as far as he was concerned personally, he did not separate practice from knowledge. He was not like those teachers of the law who, in the days of Jesus, laid upon "men burdens heavy to bear," and they themselves did not touch "the burdens with one of [their] fingers" (Luke 11: 46). His practical life was impregnated with the precepts of the Word which he fed on. And it was only *after* this that he set his heart "to teach in Israel statutes and the ordinance" (v. 10). In a word, his life and his conduct were in complete agreement with his teaching.

The consequence of this entire consecration to the Word and to the work, was that "the good hand of his God [was] upon him", *for*, it is said (notice this "for") he had directed his heart. We find this in every period of time: God's protection rests especially on those who, forgetting themselves to depend upon Him alone, consecrate themselves without reserve to His work.

In order to follow this path of obedience, without turning aside from it, Ezra needed special knowledge of the whole body of Scripture. He was a *ready* scribe in the law of Moses (v. 6); he was "the *scribe*, a scribe of the words of the commandments of Jehovah, and of his statutes to Israel" (v. 11). Often nothing is more fatal to souls than a superficial and limited knowledge of the Word. How many divisions and disputes would be avoided among the children of God, if they would consider the Scriptures in their various facets. To separate one truth from other related truths, without taking these related truths into consideration, is generally a proof of ignorance and self-will, if not the fruit of proud self-satisfaction which desires to teach others, and refuses to be instructed of God. Almost all false doctrines have the starting point in a truth taken out of context, and therefore poorly understood, which thus becomes the very root of error.

The decree of Artaxerxes, as well as the letter of Darius (Ezra 6), shows us the mental dispositions of the sovereign rulers of Persia. They had a certain fear of God, but without quickening faith. Like his grandfather Darius, Artaxerxes acknowledged the God of heaven. Although he allowed, as history tells us, each people to keep their idols, he himself had none. The doctrine of Zoroaster, the belief in a supreme God, the teachings of the wise men: all this mingled with philosophical views concerning the principal of good and evil, formed the religion of these sovereign rulers. Without doubt, this disposed them to acknowledge the "God of the heavens", but, in his decree, Artaxerxes goes further: he acknowledges the God of Ezra (v. 14), the God of Israel (v. 15), and the God of Jerusalem (v. 19). He also acknowledges his responsibility toward this God whose wrath is to be feared (v. 23). Moreover, he shows great confidence in Ezra, a man of God, for he commits the establishment of magistrates and judges for the region beyond the river to the hand of Ezra (v. 25); he knows very well that godly Ezra will not choose any who rebel against the royal authority. He desires this man to instruct the ignorant, and for him this is the guaranty of peace for his reign (v. 25). Lastly, he orders

severe measures against those who break the *law of God and of the king*, for, in his mind, he identifies these two laws one with the other (v. 26).

As for Ezra, he attributes everything to God, even the favor of the king: "Blessed be Jehovah the God of our fathers, who has put [such a thing] as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of Jehovah which is at Jerusalem; and has extended mercy to me before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty princes!" (vv. 27, 28). Above all else, he lives in the presence of His God and proves that "the hand of Jehovah... [is] upon [him]" to answer his prayer (v. 6), protect him (v. 9), strengthen him (v. 28), and deliver him (8: 31).

Ezra 8

The second exodus.

In this new exodus, Ezra is accompanied by part of the people who had remained in the province of Babylon. These people, like their leader, possess an exact genealogical record. Scriptures mentions all of them according to their families and not, like part of those in Ezra 2, according to their cities. In the first great movement of restoration, there had been relatively little doubt as to the rights of individuals to belong to the people of God, and this doubt was essentially in relation to the priesthood, but here it seems to be necessary to be even more strict than at the beginning. This phenomenon is a frequent one. The enthusiasm of first love may offer some mixture, because love and joy overflow and support the whole of the people. Foreign elements may enter in and often, shortly after the beginning, the painful experience of this situation becomes evident, but the power of the Holy Spirit is there to discern these foreign elements and separate them when the occasion presents itself. The history of the Church, at its inception, affords similar examples to us. Lying enters with Ananias and Sapphira; the flesh, which has only the outward appearance of conversion, enters with Simon the magician, but the Spirit of God watches, judges and discerns, and the house is momentarily preserved from damage. Later the assembly is more vigilant against evil: "Thou hast tried them who say themselves [are] apostles and are not, and hast found them liars" (Rev. 2: 2). It is not a sign, nor greater power, nor greater love, but rather this vigilance which becomes a necessity if one would preserve the purity of the testimony of God.

In the midst of this procession, the sons of Adonikam shine, most of whom had returned with Zerubbabel (Ezra 2: 13). Now the *last children* (v. 13) go up with Ezra; their names are not forgotten; thus, the entire family is complete and this special blessing is mentioned here in the book of God. May we also see entire families, like the family of Adonikam, among those whom the Lord calls to testify of Him in these final days!

These men, including the priests, who are mentioned in first place, and the chief men, numbered 1502 (vv. 1-14) (translator's note: seems to be 1514). But before setting out on their journey, Ezra makes a very afflicting observation: "I surveyed the people and the priests, and found none of the sons of Levi there" (v. 15). Already they were very few in Ezra 2, as we have seen, and numbered only 74 persons. Here, *not a single* Levite presents himself. They remain in the cities of the nations, occupied with their own personal interests, without any thought of going up with their brothers to serve in the house of God. Ezra is obliged to send them a special embassy of chief men and men of understanding, to induce them to join their brothers. At last 38 Levites come! There are 220 Nethinim, or approximately six servants for each Levite! Isn't a situation like this very humiliating, and can we not find instruction in it for ourselves as well? Where are the ministers, among the people of God, for, as

we have said more than once, the ministers today correspond to the Levites of those days? Where are those who serve the house of God and who fill the functions which God has assigned to them? Why is there this scarcity and poverty? Those who remained among the nations might excuse themselves on account of their occupations and responsibilities in the midst of their fellow countrymen, but must the *house of God* remain without their cooperation? Ought they not to sacrifice their own position and interests, in order to serve the Lord there where He desired to be served?

In spite of everything, we find this expression: "The good hand of our God [was] upon us" (v. 18), the only resource which Ezra could count on. And if the help granted to them was insufficient, revealing the great areas of lack caused by the people's ruin, at least there was some help, and the Lord did not abandon His own.

Faced with this culpable insufficiency, what should Ezra and his companions do? Should they attempt to remedy the situation by some human contrivance suggested by the circumstances? In no way! The house was built; the place of gathering the people together was set up; the name of the Lord dwelt there; and they must go there without delay. But, in these conditions, one thing, only one thing was *necessary*: humiliation. "And I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God" (v. 21). No blessing was possible without this fasting and humiliation, demanded by the miserable state of this handful of men, about to go to Jerusalem. How could they have found the "right way" for themselves, their children, and their possessions, in this state which was so poor and so incomplete? Others would have been tempted to "require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help them against the enemy". This thought does not even enter the heart of godly Ezra; he would have been *ashamed* to nourish such a thought and give it free reign. Had he not said to the king: "The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his anger is against all them that forsake him" (v. 22)? Would he say: I trust in the Lord, and then give the lie to this same confession by adding: But that does not completely suffice me: I must also trust in man? No, this weak remnant fast and humble themselves, and pray to God. This, and nothing else, is exactly what was called for. "We fasted, and besought our God for this; and he was entreated of us" (v. 23).

Circumstances like those of Ezra are have been found frequently and are still found in our day. Sometimes difficulties are apparently inextricable. The enemy lies in wait for us and sets himself between us and the accomplishment of a simple responsibility: the gathering together of the Lord's own and the service of the house of God. We have no strength to resist the enemy. The help of Levites, which we had looked to for some hope, fails us. Satan would like to provoke us to meet him with the king's "band of soldiers and horsemen", with the arms of the flesh, knowing that we will be defeated if we use his own weapons against him. What is to be done? The same thing Ezra did: let us persevere in fasting, humiliation and prayer, and we may be certain that God will answer us. "He was entreated of us", Ezra says. In addition to these blessed arms, Ezra had the word of God with him and he was the representative of this word to the people. Was he rich? Was he strong? In no way, but he possessed the resources of the One whose strength is made perfect in weakness.

In verses 24 to 30, the priests and Levites receive the deposit of the holy things, vessels, silver and gold, which had been voluntarily given for the house of God. These gifts were sanctified by the name of the Lord and by the character of those who kept them. "Ye are holy unto Jehovah; the vessels also are holy; and the silver and the gold is a voluntary offering to Jehovah the God of your fathers" (v. 28), Ezra tells them. These gifts, coming in large part from the king, counselors and princes, were not defiled in any way. Since the name of the Lord and his temple had been recognized by these men, God could take pleasure in their offerings. But it was necessary, even for these material gifts, whether silver or gold, that the priests watch over them and keep them carefully, for nothing must be lost. The

men entrusted with this deposit must show absolute faithfulness and integrity. Under the dispensation of grace we see the apostle Paul take the same scrupulous care to watch over the deposit confided to him by the assemblies of Gentile believers for the saints at Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8: 20).

Verses 32-34 tell us of the great zeal of the priests and Levites to fulfill their mission: they carried out their task whole-heartedly. Nothing was missing; we find the number and weight of all these objects recorded anew. May we imitate them in the responsibilities, whether great or small, which the Lord entrusts to us: may we never consider anything which He gives into our hand as belonging to ourselves, but rather as something to be rendered again to Him after having been faithfully administered for Him. Most of the time the frauds, great or small, which Christians become guilty of, whether they are committed against authorities or against the world, have no other cause than this. They consider as belonging to themselves personally something which the Lord has given them to administer, and they often expose themselves to cruel chastening as a consequence of their unfaithfulness. In contrast, the consequence of faithfulness is seen here. God watches over His goods and He preserves those who carry these gifts all along the way. The phrase, so often repeated in these chapters, reoccurs here: "And the hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way" (v. 31).

After they arrived at Jerusalem, this feeble troop of "the children of those that had been carried away, who had come out of the captivity, presented burnt offerings to the God of Israel, *twelve bullocks for all Israel*". They, also, take to heart the recognition and affirmation of the *unity of the people*. Their testimony was based on this very principle, even in their low condition. But let us note that they come to the recognition of this principle only in a condition of humiliation as regards themselves and with care to maintain the holiness of the Lord beyond any reproach. Indeed, proclaiming principles, without a moral condition which corresponds to them, is nothing less than profaning them. May we never speak of principles unless they are supported by our practical state. It is odious in God's eyes to pretend to possess the truth while living in unrighteousness (Rom 1: 18). Ignorance of divine principles, accompanied by a godly walk, according to the knowledge one possesses, is better than understanding of these truths, without holiness in the walk. In these poor souls escaped from captivity who go up to Jerusalem, we see a lovely example of the union of these two things: holiness or consecration to the Lord, and the maintenance of the unity of the people of God, in the midst of ruin.

Ezra 9 and 10

Purification of the people.

Up to this point, the restoration (for Ezra 7 to 10 deal with restoration, rather than with revival) had produced its effects on the company which went up with Ezra to Jerusalem. Brought by humiliation, fasting and supplications to realize their poor condition and all that they lacked for the service of God, these men realize that only grace can guide and keep them. They hold fast to the word of God. Their leaders understand that practical holiness is obligatory for those who have the charge of holy things. After they arrive at Jerusalem, they proclaim the solidarity of the people of God and recognize their unity, in spite of the ruin.

But the arrival of this new reinforcement will manifest the state of the people who had previously rebuilt the temple of the Lord; it is the means of revealing the hidden evil which consumes the people and hinders their spiritual development. Ezra's companions come to him and tell him what they have

seen: "The people of Israel, and the priests and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands... they have taken of their daughters for themselves and for their sons and have mingled the holy seed with the peoples of the lands"; and moreover "the hand of the princes and rulers has been *chief* in this unfaithfulness" (vv. 1, 2). The surrounding world had gradually invaded the assembly of Israel and, if they were not all contaminated, they were in great danger of being so, for their leaders had been the first to conclude profane alliances. It is a sad thing to note that all revivals are ruined successively by alliance with the world and, in this matter, the leaders, through their example, are much more guilty.

Is there a means of remedying this state of things? Ezra, the godly man, devoted to the Lord, immediately understands what is due from him: "And when I heard this thing, I rent my mantle and my garment, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down overwhelmed" (v. 3).

The first thing, then, is *individual* humiliation, while waiting for the people to recognize their fault and humble themselves in a general way. This must always be so. When faced with the revelation of the sin of the people of God, we are not called upon *to take action* first of all, but rather, to humble ourselves, and even if we should be alone, like Daniel and other faithful men of former days, and like Ezra, at the time we are studying, let us not fail to assume this attitude before God. He looks on the heart that is humbled and broken and He answers its cry.

"Then were assembled to me everyone that trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the unfaithfulness of those that had been carried away" (v. 4). The first effect of Ezra's humiliation is to group around himself those who tremble at the words of God. No doubt, they are few in number the first day, but this humiliation will spread out to all the people of God. As for them, they are characterized by what they have learned under Ezra's guidance. Knowing the word of God through Ezra, they have discovered in it the character of God who can in no way associate Himself with impurity. Has He not said: "Ye shall be holy; for I am holy" (Lev. 11: 44)? And so in his prayer (vv. 10-12 Eng), Ezra refers to the word of God, which he knows so well: "For we have forsaken thy commandments, which thou hast commanded by thy servants the prophets, saying, The land, unto which ye go to possess [it], is an unclean land through the filthiness of the peoples of the lands, through their abominations, with which they have filled it from one end to another through their uncleanness. Now, therefore, give not your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters to your sons, nor seek their peace or their prosperity for ever".

Ezra's individual humiliation consisted in bearing the sin of the people of God as *his own*. Communion with the mind of God always leads us to this. We see examples in Dan. 9: 5; Jer. 10: 23; Neh. 9: 33, and here: "O my God, *I* am ashamed and blush to lift up *my* face to thee, my God: for *our* iniquities are increased over [*our*] head, and *our* trespass is grown up to the heavens. Since the days of our fathers *we* have been in a great trespass to this day; and for *our* iniquities *we*, *our* kings, *our* priests, have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, and to captivity, and to spoil, and to confusion of face, as it is this day" (vv. 6, 7).

How great was the guilt of this people, at the moment when the favor of the Lord began to shine upon them once again, in spite of their condition of bondage! "And now for a little space there hath been favour from Jehovah our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage. For we were bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us before the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the ruins thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem" (vv. 8, 9).

And had not the Lord made them promises, if they would separate themselves from any alliance with the nations? Yes, for He had said: "that ye may be strong, and eat the good of the land, and leave it for an inheritance to your children for ever" (v. 12).

To ally themselves with the nations was to abandon separation for Him: this holiness whose value Ezra's companions had appreciated and which had directed them to that day (8: 28). Now, this was exactly what their predecessors had not observed. Alliances — which, for us, correspond to *worldliness* — had overrun them, spreading like gangrene from the priests and leaders of the people to the common people themselves. They had forgotten that along with separation they lost three significant things: *strength*, the *enjoyment* of the good things of the land of Canaan, and their permanent *inheritance* for themselves and their descendants (v. 12).

We, who are Christians, also make this same sad experience today. Strength? Note that it is not a matter of any outward force for Ezra's companions (nor is it for us), for they were only a handful of men, but the mighty hand of the Lord was with them, the enemy had been reduced to nothing and his ambushes had been dissipated. But how could they now pretend to the two other blessings, to joy and the inheritance, when corruption was established in the midst of the people?

What were they to do? Ezra humbles himself as always and as always he bows his head in the dust. With sorrow he recalls the judgment of past faults, which were nevertheless much less severe than the people deserved. "And after all that is come upon us... [thou] hast given us such deliverance as this," Ezra adds; and if we return to our wicked works, would Thou not have reason to consume us, "so that there should be no remnant nor any to escape?" (vv. 13, 14)

But, he adds, here we are: "*we are a remnant that is escaped*, as [it is] this day". The testimony is now confided to the few persons of this second exodus, who are afflicted and repentant on behalf of all the others, and who say: "Behold, we are before thee in our trespasses; for there is no standing before thee because of this" (v. 15).

Is there restoration possible at this moment for these poor escaped souls? Yes, restoration is found in the attitude which those souls take who, although they had not participated in this defilement, nevertheless assume responsibility for it so completely that they identify themselves with those who remain under God's judgment. We shall see that this attitude, taken in all sincerity of heart before God, and that this thorough confession of evil, exercises its influence on those who had sinned, in order to bring about their restoration.

In the preceding chapter, we have seen that God answered the humiliation of a single man, Ezra, by gathering around him, in the same spirit of contrition, those of his companions who trembled at the words of the God of Israel. Here, humiliation spreads to an even greater number: "And while Ezra prayed, and made confession, weeping and falling down before the house of God, there were gathered to him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children; for the people wept very much" (Ezra 10: 1).

We cannot sufficiently stress how much the blessing of the people of God may depend on one or a few faithful individuals. Ezra 5: 1 and 2 present a revival produced by two prophets which moved two leaders, and then the entire people to activity for the Lord. Here, the humiliation of one man, to whom a few individuals then associate themselves, leads to a general humiliation. And once again a single man steps forward to express it: "And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, answered and said to Ezra, We have acted unfaithfully toward our God, and have taken foreign wives of the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel concerning this thing. And now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the

counsel of [my] lord, and of those who tremble at the commandments of our God; and let it be done according to the law" (vv. 2, 3).

But that is not all. If individual humiliation, and then collective humiliation, is the first thing, neither the individual nor the people of God may remain there. *Action* must follow humiliation. "Arise", Shecaniah says to Ezra, "for this matter is incumbent on thee, and we will be with thee: be of good courage, and do [it]" (v. 4). Humiliation is not yet separation from evil. It is the path to this separation and prepares it; but, on the other hand, when it is a matter of remedying ruin, *activity without humiliation*, however zealous it may be, cannot lead to anything but further ruin. The flesh, not having been judged in humiliation, throws off all restraint when it is a question of separation from evil. Such was the zeal of Jehu. This man certainly did not bear the sin of the people as his own before God, and so he was the first to return to the golden calves at Dan and Bethel once judgment had been executed — and executed in what a manner!

Thus humiliation is necessary, but the energy to purify oneself from evil is just as indispensable. The Corinthians had understood this after the apostle exhorted them. Sorrow according to God had worked in them repentance unto salvation, true humiliation; but what promptness, what fear, what ardent desire, what *zeal*, what vengeance this humiliation had produced! In every respect, they had shown that they were pure in the matter (2 Cor. 7: 11)!

Shecaniah, the people's spokesman, here shows an energy and disinterestedness which ought to be an example to us. His father, Jehiel, was among the transgressors (v. 26)! It required the power of God, united to the zeal of Phinehas, to cause him to abandon all his own family interests and take up the cause of God single-handedly. Nevertheless this energetic man does not seek to play a role in the work of restoration; he is of no importance in his own eyes. He esteems that the thing rests on Ezra, the "ready scribe in the law of Moses, which Jehovah the God of Israel had given". In his eyes, the bearer of the Word, let us say the Word itself, must play the principal role.

Ezra does not withdraw from the obligation set before him. He immediately moves the leaders of the people to action. "Then Ezra arose, and made the chiefs of priests, of the Levites, and of all Israel, to swear that they would do according to this word. And they swore" (v. 5). But, then even when the change had been produced in the hearts of the people, and they had decided to take action, Ezra does not abandon the expression of his humiliation. A dishonor had been inflicted on the name of the Lord and still remained associated with it. Until the purification was complete, mourning and fasting suited those who had resolved to separate themselves from evil: "And Ezra arose from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib; and when he came thither, he ate no bread and drank no water; for he mourned because of the unfaithfulness of them that had been carried away" (v. 6).

The energy of a few no longer tolerates any disobedience among the people. All must submit themselves. Those who do not want to do so are considered as "wicked" and are cut off from the assembly: "And they made proclamation in Judah and Jerusalem to all the children of the captivity, that they should gather themselves together unto Jerusalem; and that whosoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the princes and the elders, all his substance should be confiscated, and himself separated from the congregation of those that had been carried away" (vv. 7, 8). The discipline which had been completely neglected and stopped by the moral slackening of the people, is now exercised according to God.

All the men of Judah and Benjamin gather at Jerusalem. Ezra speaks to them. He no longer says, as in Ezra 9: 7: "We have been in great trespass", but: "Ye have acted unfaithfully, and have taken

foreign wives... separate *yourselves*" (vv. 10, 11), for now it is a matter of reaching the conscience of those who have sinned. To the sorrow over the faults they had committed was added the unfavorable season, "a time of pouring rain, and it [was] not possible to stand without" (v. 13). Sometimes material difficulties oppose immediate purification. This could not be "a work for one day or two", for the evil was wide-spread and, as everyone confessed, "[they were] many that [had] transgressed in this thing". In this way God makes them understand that it is more difficult to repair the evil done than to commit it; but He is full of patience and mercy and takes account of the heart's decision; he knows that the guilty ones are not seeking loop-holes and that they truly desire to obey.

May we as well, in difficult circumstances, exercise the patience of Ezra, the patience of God, toward our brothers, lest they be discouraged. It might have seemed to those who were "a remnant that [was] escaped" who had not participated in this iniquity, that an immediate separation, even an instantaneous separation, from evil was necessary in spite of "pouring rain". Brotherly love does not calculate in this way; brotherly love knows that these words: "we are many that have transgressed in this thing", are not empty words. Love endures all things, believes all things, and hopes all things just because it is love.

If only the sentiment which animated the people had been unanimous! Unhappily, this was not so. "Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah stood up against this; and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite helped them" (v. 15). What motives could have turned them to this path of opposition? None are given to us. At the very most, we might think that one of them, if he is the same Meshullam as the Levite of verse 29, having taken part in the evil, had personal reasons for opposing the decision of the assembly. Faced with this opposition, entirely contrary to the mind of God, what do those who have decided to purify themselves do? They do not exclude their brothers, but rather, they bear with them, and the self-will of the dissident individuals needs no other judgment than the decisive action of the majority. We have the joy of seeing, later, Shabbethai, the Levite, (more guilty than others on account of his functions, and then because he identifies himself with Meshullam,) being used to cause the people to understand the law, and then set up over the outward business of the house of God (Neh. 8: 7; Neh. 11: 16). Indeed, the opposition of these men in no way influences the decision of the assembly; it is even a means by which God tests the resolution of heart of their brothers. It does not stop the onward march of the whole company, for an assembly decision does not require absolute unanimity of the persons present, although this unanimity is desirable and may even be realized if hearts have to do with God in the same degree. On the other hand, we do not see that the few persisted in imposing their views on their brothers, but they seem to have been quiet, without appealing to their conscience in order to condemn the conscience of others.

On the first day of the tenth month, Ezra and the chiefs of the fathers, men well-versed in the Word, wise and respected by the people, "sat down... to examine the matter". The evil was evident: it was not a matter of knowing whether or not it existed, but each particular case deserved special discernment and judgment according to God. *Three full months* sufficed to set this immense difficulty in order (vv. 16, 17). Judgment was pronounced in love, without any being spared, nor was there any favoritism, beginning with the priests. These, whose position made them more guilty than their brothers, "offered a ram of the flock, as trespass-offering for their guilt" (v. 19). Having acknowledged their sin, they could offer no other sacrifice except a trespass offering, but it was important, because of their office, that they publicly express their humiliation by their offering. Next come the Levites, the singers, the doorkeepers, and lastly those "of Israel". The list is a long one, but what grace! the restoration is effectuated without any new breach, through humiliation which becomes a source of decision and energy, and by means of the ministry of the Word.

This ministry, as we have seen, characterizes Ezra. In him we find neither miraculous gift, nor prophetic gift, as in a Haggai or a Zechariah, nor an extraordinary display of divine power. He has nothing which goes beyond the common measure and ordinary resources, but his heart is devoted to the honor of the lovely name of the Lord, and it is concerned for the prosperity of the people. Above all, he is characterized by the understanding of the law of Moses, of the written Word. The Word directs him in everything, and his faith rests on the Word. He insists on the principles which the Word presents, he puts them into practice and does not suffer anyone to depart from them. In this way he earns the confidence, even of the king, and this is also *the only source of his authority*.

The book of Ezra offers us precious teachings which apply to the present day position of the people of God, in the midst of the ruins of Christendom. It teaches us the elements of the testimony, the characteristics of a revival, the conditions of restoration, when the witnesses have forgotten separation from the world. May we, in these points, consider this precious portion of the Word with great attention!