

The Mountain Made a Plain

by J.C. Philpot

The sermon teaches that the Lord can remove any obstacle or difficulty that stands in the way of completing a work of grace in the soul, just as Zerubbabel removed the obstacles to rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem.

Scripture: Ezra 1:1, Ezra 6:8, Job 23:16, Isaiah 64:1, Zechariah 4:7, Luke 14:29, Philippians 1:6, Colossians 2:14

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Gods Grace"

Description

J.C. Philpot preaches about the spiritual significance of Zerubbabel's completion of the temple, drawing parallels between the obstacles faced in rebuilding the physical temple and the challenges encountered in the believer's spiritual journey. He emphasizes the role of grace in removing mountains of unbelief, sin, hard-heartedness, and difficulties that hinder the completion of God's work in the soul. Philpot highlights the need for the almighty power of Jesus to bring forth the head-stone, signifying the completion of the spiritual building with shoutings of 'Grace, grace unto it,' both in individual hearts and in the collective church of God.

Transcript

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"Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain--and he shall bring forth the headstone thereof with shoutings, crying, Grace, grace, unto it." Zechariah 4:7

The children of Israel were, beyond all controversy, a "typical people"; and therefore God's dealings with Israel after the flesh were typical of his dealings with his elect family, Israel after the Spirit. This typical character of God's dealings with them we may trace throughout the whole of the Old Testament. I need not multiply instances, for they are to be found in almost every page; but I shall confine myself this morning to that portion of their history, which, with God's blessing, may throw some light upon the text.

You know that, as a chastisement for their sins, the children of Israel were carried captive to Babylon, and remained there seventy years. When the seventy years, however, were expired, "the Lord," we read, "stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying--"The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has appointed me to build him a Temple at Jerusalem in the land of Judah. All of you who are his people

may return to Jerusalem in Judah to rebuild this Temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, who lives in Jerusalem. And may your God be with you!" (Ezra 1:1-3.)

In obedience to this edict, many of the children of Israel left Babylon to return to the land of their fathers, and to Jerusalem, their beloved abode. And one of the first things which they did, after "they had set the altar upon its base," (Ezra 3:3) was, to commence rebuilding the temple of the Lord, which had been laid in ruins by Nebuchadnezzar. We have an account of the laying of the foundation, which I need not enter into, in the book of Ezra (3:8-13) where we find that Zerubbabel, who was the temporal head, and Joshua, who was the spiritual head--the one being the Prince, and the other the High Priest, "set forward the work of the house of the Lord." And we gather from Zech. 4:9, that the hands of Zerubbabel in particular laid the foundation-stone, he being the Governor of Judah, and the lineal descendant of David, and thus a type of the Lord Jesus.

But no sooner was the foundation of the temple laid, than difficulties arose as to its completion. "The adversaries of Judah," when their offer to become co-partners and co-workers was refused by Zerubbabel and Joshua, "hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose" during several reigns; and wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes, complaining that they were "building up the rebellious and the bad city once more;" and if they succeeded in setting up the walls again, there would be no more tax or tribute paid to the kings of Babylon. In consequence of these obstacles, for thirteen or fourteen years was the building of the temple much hindered, and during the latter portion of that period entirely suspended.

But at the end of this period of fourteen years, the Lord raised up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, in order to stir up the spirits of the people to go on with the building of the temple in spite of all the opposition made to it; as we find Ezra 5:1, 2, "At that time the prophets Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo prophesied in the name of the God of Israel to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem. Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jehozadak responded by beginning the task of rebuilding the Temple of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them and helped them." And we find the Lord prospering the undertaking, and moving the heart of Darius king of Persia, so that he gave command that they should not be interrupted in the building of the temple, but should have money given them from the king's tribute towards the completion. (Ezra 6:8.)

At the time, then, that this prophecy was delivered--which was just at the end of the fourteen years, but while all the difficulties still existed in the way of finishing the temple--the heart of the people was faint and desponding; for they saw no prospect of the temple ever being completed. It was begun, but how it was to be finished they knew not; and their hearts sank within them at seeing the walls of the temple only half-reared, and no probability of the head-stone being ever put on.

Under these trying circumstances it was, that the Lord spoke these words to Zerubbabel, who had laid the foundation of the temple--"Who are you, O great mountain?"--thus alluding to the difficulties, opposition, and impediments that lay in the way of completing the temple. "Who are you, O great mountain?" What are all those adversaries, all this opposition, all these difficulties? "Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain." All the difficulties shall as much disappear, as though a mountain in a moment were to sink down into a level. "Therefore, this is what the Lord says: I have returned to show mercy to Jerusalem. My Temple will be rebuilt, says the Lord Almighty, and plans will be made for the reconstruction of Jerusalem." (Zech. 1:16.) He who has begun the temple shall also complete it; as we read, "the hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house, his hands shall also finish it." (Zech. 4:9.) And so it

happened; the prophecy was literally and historically fulfilled; the mountain became a plain--and the head-stone was brought forth and put upon the temple with shoutings of "Grace, grace unto it;" as we read, "The Temple was completed on March 12, during the sixth year of King Darius's reign. The Temple of God was then dedicated with great joy by the people of Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the people who had returned from exile." (Ezra 6:15, 16.)

These, then, are the historical circumstances on which I hope, with God's blessing, this morning to build up a spiritual and experimental interpretation; and to show spiritually, if God enables me, how all the mountains (and many there are) which stand in the way of the completion of the work of grace in the soul, and the building of the inward temple where the Holy Spirit takes up his abode, (for "your bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit") all disappear before the spiritual Zerubbabel, the Lord of life and glory. And how he is sure to bring forth the head-stone, and put it upon the spiritual building with shoutings of "Grace, grace unto it." As this spiritual interpretation is my object, and this the line of things I mean to pursue, I shall, with God's blessing, take up the words as they lie before me.

I. The Lord here begins with an INQUIRY, "Who are you, O great mountain?" There are many, probably, here who have never seen a mountain; and if you have never seen one, you can have a faint conception what a mountain is. I never saw one until I was more than twenty-three years old; and I shall never forget how surprised I was, as I was traveling through North Wales, when I first beheld its steep and rocky sides. My idea of a mountain was, that it was a high grassy hill, an elevated knoll, covered with beautiful trees and herbage up to the very top. But as to those lofty peaks, that thrust themselves into the sky, completely barren of verdure, with their deep and rugged precipices--of such a mountain as that, I had not the least conception. In carrying, then, into your mind what a mountain is, you must not think of such a hill as Primrose Hill, or such grassy knolls as are in this level, cultivated country; but you must conceive an object that rears up its lofty peaks into the sky, and presents an insuperable and impenetrable barrier, an obstacle not to be climbed over, but which must be entirely removed that a free passage may be afforded. And unless you carry into your mind this idea, that these tall peaks, deep precipices, and unfathomable abysses present an insuperable obstacle, you cannot enter into the mind of the Spirit in the text, and will therefore lose much of the sweetness, beauty, and force of it.

The Lord, then, addresses himself to this mountain, and says, "Who are you, O great mountain?" As though he had said, "Let us look at you; let us take your dimensions; let us see your heights; let us look at your depths; let us view you in all your magnitude, and examine this insuperable obstacle that stands in the way. 'Who are you?' Be you ever so high; be you ever so huge; be your precipices ever so deep; be your peaks ever so lofty; 'who are you, O great mountain? before Zerubbabel'--let him but speak, let him but appear--'you shall become a plain.' It matters not how high; it matters not how deep; 'before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain.'"

Now, let us look at this spiritually. Say, that the Lord has begun a work of grace upon your hearts. Zerubbabel (Jesus, set forth by that name), the true Prince of Israel, through the operation of God, the Holy Spirit, has laid the foundation of a spiritual temple in your conscience. But no sooner is the foundation-stone of God's grace laid in the soul, than it is with us spiritually as it was with the Jews naturally; opposition arises, and enemies start up on every hand; and the great mountain which before did not appear, rears up its head. The adversaries of the church were quiet enough when she was in Babylon; but when she came forth to build up the temple at Jerusalem, then they started up. So spiritually--all the enemies, obstacles, impediments, and difficulties that the quickened soul meets with, were dead as stones, when there was no work going on in the conscience; but no sooner does Zerubbabel lay the

foundation-stone of grace in the heart, than adversaries rise up thick--lofty mountains begin to start up, and, where before there was nothing but a plain, thrust up their lofty peaks into the sky.

1. For instance. There is the mountain of God's inflexible JUSTICE. Who knows anything of God's justice, righteousness, purity, holiness, and indignation against sin while in a state of nature? But when the spiritual Zerubbabel lays the foundation-stone of grace in the heart, this lofty mountain for the first time begins to appear; the high and rugged peaks of God's immutable justice, and the deep abysses and precipices of eternal woe--this Sinai mountain, hitherto not perceived, rises up between heaven and the soul. Now this mountain cannot be climbed over. There are many who are trying to wind their way around this mountain; but they will only fall down its precipices. Some skillful engineers are attempting to lower its peaks, and bridge its ravines; but the rocks will fall upon them, and the bridges break under them, and let them down into ever-devouring flames.

The mountain of God's justice in a broken law is not to be passed over by a fallen creature like man; it ever stands up as an impenetrable barrier between God and the soul until Zerubbabel appears; but "before Zerubbabel," this lofty mountain of God's inflexible justice becomes a plain. He has fulfilled it; therefore he has removed it out of the way. As the apostle speaks, "Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross." (Col. 2:14.) By fulfilling the law, he removed the impenetrable barrier of God's inflexible justice. He made no bridge over the precipices; he did not lower a little the peaks, that the sinner might by degrees climb over them; but by fulfilling the Law, he completely put it out of the way. Thus before the spiritual Zerubbabel this mountain of inflexible justice becomes a plain.

2. But there is also an UNBELIEVING heart, which stands up as a great mountain between salvation and the soul. We know nothing of an unbelieving heart until God the Spirit makes the conscience tender in his fear. Deceived by Satan, we mistake presumption for faith, and vain-confidence for a good hope through grace; the unbelief and infidelity of our fallen nature are completely hidden from us; and we know no more about the workings of a fearful, doubting heart, and the utter impossibility of creating spiritual faith in our own souls, than the dead in the grave-yard. But when the spiritual Zerubbabel sets his hand to the work, and lays the foundation-stone of grace in the conscience, then for the first time this mountain begins to appear--the mountain of a doubting, unbelieving, and infidel heart, which questions everything that God has revealed, and will not and cannot receive the truth as it is in Jesus. And O, what struggles, difficulties, perplexities, and exercises are felt in the soul through this great mountain of unbelief which rears up its huge head so unexpectedly!

When God the Spirit convinces us of unbelief, he does not create the mountain; for if he did, it would make God the author of sin; but he shows us the mountain which before was hidden from our view, and makes us feel what a barrier it is between heaven and our souls. The mountain was there before, but we did not see it. When this truth is revealed by the Spirit in the conscience, that "without faith it is impossible to please God," we are brought to see, that to live and die in unbelief, is to live and die in our sins. As soon, then, as we get faith, we feel unbelief in our hearts. For we need living faith to believe our own unbelief; spiritual light to see its existence and divine life to feel its power. O this great mountain that stands up as an insuperable obstacle between heaven and our souls!

But the Lord says, "Who are you, O great mountain?" "Are you so high, are you so deep, are you so immense, that you cannot be removed?" For if it is not removed, not a single soul can get to heaven. But some say, "We must do our best to get over this mountain--we must take God at his word; we must

believe his promises, look to Jesus, and rely upon his truth." In other words, we must, with a great deal of pains and skill, lower this mountain, level it, tunnel it, cut through it, or make a road over it. But a living soul finds it no such easy thing to take God at his word, no such simple thing to believe the Lord's promises. He finds that all this "taking God at his word," leaves him still in the mud and mire of doubt and fear, still in the dry pit where there is no water, still under the curse and sentence of a broken law. Therefore, all this taking God at his word, looking to the promises, relying on Jesus, without the Spirit's inward work and witness, is found in our experience to be utterly unable to remove the mountain of unbelief.

Now the Lord says, "Who are you, O great mountain? before Zerubbabel, you shall become a plain." The spiritual Zerubbabel, with one glance of his eye, with one touch of his finger, with one word of his lips, in one moment, can cause faith to spring up in the soul to receive him in all his covenant fullness. And thus, the great mountain of unbelief, which seemed completely irremovable and utterly impassable, sinks down into a plain; and we can no more refuse to believe when the spiritual Zerubbabel gives us faith, than we could believe before he gave it. When faith is given, of all things it is most easy to believe; the mountain before Zerubbabel sinks into a plain.

3. But there is also the burden of SIN, that lies hard and heavy on a tender conscience. The iniquities and transgressions of his past life; the base, base backsliding of which he has been and is perpetually guilty; the slips, falls, and inconsistent words and actions; and the horrible workings of a depraved nature--all these at times lie with great weight and power on the conscience of an awakened sinner, and, like a mountain, press down his soul to the earth.

"How is this great mountain of sin and sinfulness," asks the soul, "to be removed? I cannot change my own heart; I cannot take away the burden of sin; I cannot purge my guilty conscience; I cannot bring spiritual, holy, and heavenly thoughts into my mind. How is this great mountain to be removed?" Why, such a mountain as that left upon the soul would be a millstone to sink it into the lowest depths of hell.

But when the Lord says, "Who are you, O great mountain?" this burden of sin, this weight of guilt that makes your soul cry and groan? What are you "before Zerubbabel?" let him but speak with power, "it shall become a plain." For Zerubbabel, the spiritual Zerubbabel, has shed atoning blood to wash away all this guilt, has brought in everlasting righteousness to justify the ungodly, and has a heart full of love which he can and does shed abroad in the soul of his beloved ones. Thus, then, this burden of guilt and shame, this great mountain, before Zerubbabel, let him but speak, becomes a plain.

4. A HARD heart. And O, what a burden a hard heart is to one whose conscience has been made tender in God's fear! A hard, rocky, unfeeling heart--what a great mountain is this between God and the soul! When we cannot produce one feeling of contrition, when we cannot raise up one pang of godly sorrow, when not a sigh will come out of our steely bosom, not a single tear fall from our iron eye, O, at what a distance does this hard heart keep us from the Lord! What a burden, what a plague, what a source of guilt and trouble is a hard heart to all who fear his name! O this great mountain that thrusts up its lofty peak into the sky, so that heaven is not seen, nor the countenance of God beheld, nor the loving-kindness of Jesus' heart is realized; but nothing seen except this dark and impenetrable barrier between God and our souls! We cannot move it. All the preaching in the world cannot stir it, all the praying in the world cannot move it, and all the exertions of the creature cannot alter it. You might as well try to remove London from its place as try to move away the rocky barrier of a hard, unfeeling, impenetrable heart.

But, before Zerubbabel, the spiritual Zerubbabel, the mountain becomes a plain. In one moment, the hard, unfeeling heart that seems shut up in chains of adamant ice, in one moment, can he make it flow down and dissolve. Did not the church feel this, when she cried, "O, that you would rend the heavens, that you would come down, that the mountains might flow down at your presence?" (Isa. 64:1.) This is the way whereby Zerubbabel removes the mountain of a hard heart. He does not remove the mountain (if I may use the expression) physically, but he makes it dissolve, flow down, and melt into a plain. He softens the heart, (as Job says, "God makes my heart soft," 23:16) and makes it tender and contrite before him.

5. But a thousand DIFFICULTIES, a thousand PERPLEXITIES stand in the way of a soul that fears God. Men devoid of the grace of God, in a fleshly profession of religion, have no difficulties; the constant burden of their song is "What a pleasant thing religion is!" "It never was designed," they quote, "to make our pleasure less." "Cheerful piety, how delightful it is!" is the great song of the day. But if such 'silken holiday professors' knew anything of the difficulties, exercises, temptations, and sorrows that lie in the path of every real Christian, we would not hear so much about cheerful piety, which is often but another name for delusion and hypocrisy.

Look at the rebuilding of the temple by the remnant that returned from Babylon; view the obstacles thrown in the way of its completion; see how the enemies start up at every stop; how the great king sends his commands not to go on with it; how the builders are compelled for many years to desist from putting a single stone upon the walls; what despondency seized the breasts of those that loved Zion to see the place of God's abode desolate; and how indeed they found that prophecy fulfilled that "the wall should be built in troublous times!" (Dan. 9:25.) Had they much "cheerful piety," as they surveyed the unfinished pile?

But does not this DELAY of the work set forth one of the great mountains that the children of God find in their path? The work of grace seems often at a standstill in them. And what a trying path it is to God's people, that, perhaps for thirteen or fourteen years, they cannot trace the hands of the spiritual Zerubbabel to have laid a single stone in their heart, or raised up one clear and striking Ebenezer! This apparently complete suspension of the work makes them often say, "Surely if I were the Lord's, I would feel more than I do! I would have more going on in my soul; I would certainly experience more sorrow, or more joy; more castings down, or more liftings up; more darkness or more light; more striking dealings of the Lord in providence; more manifest testimonies in grace; surely if the Lord were at work on my conscience, I would not be at this standstill for so many years."

But look at the temple. Several years elapsed without a single stone being put upon the walls. The foundation had been laid, and the walls raised to a certain height; but for a long time there was a complete suspension of work. This entire cessation from building, producing hopelessness and despondency in the minds of the people as to its completion, was chiefly "the great mountain" that the Lord declared should be removed. The hands of Zerubbabel would complete what his hands had begun. And we know that this great mountain became a plain--that King Darius issued orders that the temple should be completed, and that he who opposed the work would be hanged, and his house made a ash-hill. (Ezra 6:11.) Thus Zerubbabel literally and actually brought forth the head-stone with the shoutings of those exulting in this manifestations of the Lord's grace and favor who had once sunk into distress and despondency.

But what a mountain is this in the way of God's people! To feel so little faith in exercise, so little love, so little joy, their affections so cold, and so little life and power in their hearts, is indeed at times to a tender conscience a great mountain. "O," says such an one, "that I could feel more! How many sermons do I

hear, and not a single word comes with power to my heart! How many chapters I read, and not a verse is applied with sweetness to my soul! How I go on sighing and groaning, and yet seem not to advance one step forward in the heavenly road!"

"Who are you, O great mountain?" the Lord still says by his prophet. "Who are you?" What! Is this mountain too great to be removed? Are these peaks too lofty to flow down at the Lord's presence? "Who are you?" "Before Zerubbabel,"--let him but speak, let him but appear, let him but smile, let him but drop one soft word into the conscience, "before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain."

6. But whatever good thing we try to do--whatever spiritual thing we are engaged in, we are sure to find some mountain or other in the way. When busy in the world, when engaged in business, when occupied with the things of time and sense, there are no difficulties then. You can use your head and hands, and employ your thoughts without interruption; but no sooner does the soul become engaged in spiritual things than a thousand vain thoughts intrude, a thousand worldly things fill the mind; and it seems scarcely possible to be spiritual and heavenly-minded for a single half hour. This apparent (for in the case of the spiritual building of the temple of mercy there is no real) suspension of the Lord's dealings with the soul is indeed a great mountain.

"O," says the poor groaning soul, "if I could but be spiritual, if I were but heavenly minded, if I had more sweet communion with Jesus, if I could see him agonizing under my sins, if I could but have a solemn sight of the Son of God suffering and dying for me! But whenever I try to take up spiritual things, a host of vain and worldly thoughts rush into my mind, and my gadding, roving, roaming, adulterous, idolatrous heart is running everywhere. I cannot read the word; I cannot fix my attention; I cannot understand nor feel what the Bible says; I cannot lift up my heart to God for five minutes, nor is my soul melted by his love. O, what a mountain, what a barrier, what an obstacle there is in the way between God and my soul!"

"Who are you, O great mountain?" How the Lord challenges the mountain to stand forth in all its stature! How he takes a survey of it in every part; he gauges the depth, and measures the height, and looks at it in all its towering bulk, and all its huge dimensions! "Who are you?" What! too great to be removed? too hard and rocky to knocked down! "Before Zerubbabel!" one touch of his finger, one glance from his eye, one word from his lips; let it be the highest mountain, although it be a second Andes, it shall at once "become a plain."

Do not you find it sometimes to be so? Your hard thoughts of God are removed; your doubts and fears take wing and fly away; your carnality and earthliness are for a time dispersed; heavenly affections, spiritual desires, holy breathings, and ardent longings come into your heart; and you feel some embracement of Jesus in the arms of faith, because "before Zerubbabel" this mountain has become a plain.

But some may ask, "Why has the Lord appointed that these mountains should stand up between himself and our hearts?" I will answer this question by another. Why did the Lord permit the temple to be so interrupted by the adversaries of Judah? Was it not his sovereign pleasure that the temple should be rebuilt? Did he not declare that the glory of the latter house should exceed the glory of the former? Did he not mean it to come to pass? Why did he then allow these adversaries to rise up on every hand to stop its completion? To show them these two things, which man cannot learn in any other way:

1. The utter helplessness, complete weakness, and thorough impotency of the creature to everything good.

2. the almighty power of the Lord displayed in removing every obstacle in the way of his will.

People talk of "Almighty God;" "the Almighty" is on everybody's lips; but how few know that he is the Almighty! And the people of God too, though persuaded that he is almighty, and that the spiritual Zerubbabel has "all power in heaven and earth," yet when they come into the slightest difficulty, their faith staggers and gives way, and they cannot believe that he has power or will to deliver. Have you not been in temptations, out of which you believed the Lord himself could not deliver you; at least, if the words did not come from your lips, the thought passed in your heart. Have you not been in trials, out of which you have been confident no good could come? And have you not been in straits and difficulties when it seemed utterly impossible for the Lord to appear? What was all this? Were you not doubting the very omnipotency of God, which is the foremost article of your creed, and secretly saying, "he is not almighty?"

Now, the Lord, to show that he is almighty, causes or permits these mountains to rise up in our paths, that he may have the glory of taking them out of the way; that he may convince us that we have not the least power to remove them ourselves; and when he removes them, that he may get glory to himself; for he is a jealous God, and will not give his glory to another.

Now I would ask those here who know the Lord, have not you ever found the highest mercy to be shown forth in the deepest misery; your clearest deliverances to come out of your sorest temptations; and the greatest power of God to appear in the greatest weakness of the creature? And why is this? In order to convince you, not as a cut and dried article of a Calvinistic creed, but to show you in your very heart of hearts, in the very depths of your conscience, what a poor helpless creature you are in the things of God; and thus to make it plain that the hand of the Lord has done it all.

If there were no mountains of difficulties, perplexities, and obstacles for the soul to be harassed and exercised with, we would not need a Zerubbabel, an almighty Jesus to appear; we would not need the power of God to be put forth in our hearts. We would be satisfied with a sound Calvinistic creed, with a dead formal profession, with a name to live, and merely seeing the truth in the letter. But having these mountains of difficulties, obstacles, perplexities, and exercises, we are brought to feel our need of the almighty power of God experimentally put forth to remove them. And when the Lord does remove them, the soul can give him all the praise and glory. Then "before Zerubbabel" every mountain "becomes a plain."

And if you are a child of God, let these two things be written on your conscience, (God himself in mercy write them there!) you will have a mountain in your way well near every step that you take in the divine life. If you ever were to visit a mountainous country, you would see that it was a continued chain of eminences, so that one is only the introduction to another; that mountain rises after mountain, and peak after peak; so that the whole journey is a succession of mountains. So, spiritually, there will be a succession of mountains in the path of every one who fears God. And you will also find this, that "before Zerubbabel," before the almighty power of Jesus, these mountains will become "a plain." And thus we learn to sink into the depths of self-abasement, and put the crown upon the head of him to whom it alone rightly belongs.

II. "And he shall bring forth the head-stone thereof with shoutings, crying, Grace, grace unto it." What is literally meant by these words? Zerubbabel had laid the foundation of the temple; but it had been at a standstill for several years. The Lord, therefore, promises, by his prophet Zechariah, that the hands of Zerubbabel which had laid the foundation should also put on "the head-stone," or the last stone in the roof; and that the temple should stand forth complete, towering in all its beautiful proportions and all its sublime

grandeur. This is the historical meaning of the prophecy. But we have a spiritual and experimental meaning couched under it. The spiritual Zerubbabel, Jesus, the Lord of life and glory, whose hands have laid the foundation-stone of grace in the heart, will accomplish the work, and bring forth the head-stone thereof, with shoutings of "Grace, grace unto it."

1. There are two senses in which the spiritual Zerubbabel brings forth the head-stone--one, when Jesus reveals himself with divine power to the soul, and thus completes the spiritual building, making the heart a temple for God to dwell in; for, until Christ is manifested in the conscience, and his love, blood, and grace are sealed with a divine witness upon the heart, the head-stone is not brought forth, nor are there shoutings of "Grace, grace unto it." The building is begun, but not finished; the walls are raised up, but the roof is needed to keep out the wind and weather. The temple is not completed for the Lord of the temple to come in and dwell there until the top-stone is fitted in.

How many of God's dear children are in that state! Zerubbabel has laid the foundation in their conscience; there is a work of grace begun in their heart; there are testimonies, signs, tokens, promises, evidences; yet the head-stone is not brought forth, with shoutings of "Grace, grace unto it." The last stone is not yet laid on; the arch lacks the key-stone; so that they cannot say, "My Lord and my God." And because the headstone is not brought forth with shoutings, they are troubled, distressed, exercised, tossed up and down with fears that they are not "the Lord's building," for they think that if the work were of the Lord it would have been finished long ago.

But look at the temple! Consider the long time it took to finish. Look at what an interval took place between laying the first stone and putting on the roof. What exercises the spiritual Israel must have had in those days, and how often must the souls of those who loved Zion have sunk within them when they looked at the unfinished walls! Many doubtless were the sighs, cries, and groans that went up from the people of Israel, that the Lord would complete the temple; and many anxious enquiries among themselves, "Shall we ever see the head-stone brought forth? Shall we ever behold the Lord's house completed?"

So spiritually. How many of God's dear people are troubled in their minds, and go on questioning, doubting, and fearing perhaps for years, because they have no clear testimony in their conscience that their sins are pardoned, are unable to cry, "Abba Father!" or say, "the Lord is their God!" But he that has laid the foundation of the temple will also complete it. Shall the heavenly Architect commence and not complete! Shall his enemies ever mock him, and say, "He began to build, and was not able to finish?" (Luke 14:29, 30.) Shall not grace finish what grace began? The promise is express. "Being confident of this very thing, that he which has begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." (Phil. 1:6.) The mountain of doubt, fear, unbelief, questionings, perplexities, shall "before Zerubbabel," in his own time and way, "become a plain;" and he will bring forth the head-stone thereof with such sweet revelations of his blood and love that the soul will shout "Grace, grace unto it."

But why is the REPETITION? O there is a sweetness in it. Grace begins the work, and grace completes it. Grace applied the Law, and grace reveals the Gospel; grace killed, and grace makes alive; grace wounded, and grace heals. Grace laid the foundation, and grace brings forth the top-stone. Thus grace reigns first, and grace reigns last; yes, every stone in the temple is laid by the hands of almighty grace. One "grace"-- that would not express half the feeling of the soul--"grace, grace" must be redoubled, as though the soul were under the necessity of repeating it--"grace, grace!" for nothing but grace could ever have laid the foundation, and nothing short of grace could ever have brought forth the head-stone.

2. But there is another meaning of the word. For the temple shadowed forth not merely the work of grace upon the heart whereby the bodies of God's people become the temple of the Holy Spirit, but also the whole church of God, who are living stones in that temple, which will one day shine forth in all its beauty and glory, and of which Solomon's temple was but a feeble and imperfect type. Zerubbabel has laid the foundation below, and in each successive soul that he takes to glory there is another living stone laid in the glorious temple above. But the head-stone is not yet brought forth. There are many of the stones yet buried in the quarry; others are being hewed out of the rock, and dug from the hole of the pit; others are being chipped and hacked, to bring them into some fitting shape; and others, already squared and fashioned to occupy their destined place above, are lying for a short time amid the parings, chippings, and rubbish. The head-stone is not yet brought forth with shoutings.

But when the last vessel of mercy shall be safely gathered in, and the great, the glorious, the living temple shall stand forth in all its beautiful proportions and sublime grandeur; when Zerubbabel, the heavenly Architect, who laid the first and each successive stone, brings forth the head-stone, the key-stone of the arch, which binds in the roof and completely fastens the building, the arches of heaven will ring with shoutings; and there will be one universal burst of joy and exultation from the redeemed throng of "Grace, grace unto it."

The sound of good works will not be heard there; creature righteousness will not be extolled there; there will be no discordant clink of man's axe and hammer; there will not be a semi-chorus half round the throne above singing the praises of human piety and creature exertions; but there will be one universal song of harmony, extolling sovereign, superabounding grace.

And if the Lord does not teach us the first note of the song of the Lamb here below, depend upon it, we shall never sing it hereafter. But O, what harmony will come in a full body from the heavenly choir, when there will not be one discordant note, nor one jarring sound, but all will be in sweet melody, and "grace, grace," will still be the song throughout the countless ages of eternity!

But what a deal of exercise and work upon the conscience it takes to make a man feelingly join in that note! What depths of man's depravity must be known as well as heights of redeeming mercy! What an acquaintance is needed with the workings of a fallen nature! What troubles, exercises, perplexities, and temptations has the soul to wade through, and what testimonies and deliverances to experience before it is fit to join in that triumphant song.

Now, if the literal temple had been built up without any trouble whatever; if all had gone on smooth and easy, there would not have been any shouting of "grace, grace," when it was finished. But when they saw how the Lord had brought a few feeble exiles from Babylon; how he had supported them amid, and carried them through all their troubles; and how he who laid the foundation had brought forth the head-stone, all that stood by could say, "Grace, grace unto it." It was these very perplexities and trials that made them join so cheerily in the shout, and made the heart and soul to leap with the lips when they burst forth with "Grace, grace unto it."

And who will shout the loudest hereafter? He who has known and felt the most of the aboundings of sin to sink his soul down into grief and sorrow; and most of the super-aboundings of grace over sin to make him triumph and rejoice. Who will have most reason to sing, "Grace, grace?" The lost and ruined wretch, who has feared that he should go to hell a thousand times over, and yet has been delivered thence by sovereign grace, and brought to the glory and joy of heaven. No other person is fit to join in that song; and

I am sure no other will join in it but he who has painfully and experimentally known the bitterness of sin, and the evil of a depraved heart; and yet has seen and felt that grace has triumphed over all, in spite of the devil, in spite of the world, and in spite of himself, and brought him to that blessed place where many times he was afraid he should never come!

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