

The Time in Which We Live (Ezra 8)

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of having a burden for the Lord's testimony and standing with God in the face of opposition, as exemplified in the books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

Topics: "Spiritual Captivity", "Faithfulness To God"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks preaches on the relevance of Old Testament books like Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther to our spiritual condition today, emphasizing the spiritual captivity that occurs when God's testimony breaks down among His people. He highlights the importance of having a burden for the Lord's testimony, His interests, and His people, as seen in the lives of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and Daniel. The sermon delves into the necessity of facing opposition from the enemy when standing for God's purposes and the fourfold ministry aspects of prayer, recovery, building, and safeguarding the testimony of God. It concludes with a call to guard the deposit of faith entrusted to us and present it back to the Lord complete and without mixture.

Transcript

An Appeal To The People Of God

Ezra 8.

The ground upon which we stand is very much more positive at this present time than even the Old Testament saints enjoyed, for we look back to Calvary's triumphant accomplishment. Yet the Old Testament position and condition is also a true picture of our own time and condition spiritually; I am thinking in terms of books of the Bible and not of verses.

We want to see what the Books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther have to say to us. I feel convinced that we are living in a time very truly represented by these books, and in that sense we are living in Bible times, so that these books are very up-to-date, and have their abiding meaning for our time.

I cannot think the Lord would merely have given us a set of books of history about things which happened hundreds of years ago with no real value for us. His Word says, "Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning" (Rom. 15:4), so we see God meant them to say something to us.

The First Factor: Spiritual Captivity.

Let us see what these books represent, and how they touch our time. There are common factors about them. Firstly, their one general historic background - the people of God in captivity in Chaldea resulting from a spiritual breakdown.

Without going into what Babylon and Chaldea may mean, we take it as a settled fact that, when God's testimony breaks down in His people, a state of spiritual captivity ensues, and they are spiritually outside of the place where the testimony of God has its place.

They were in an earth-order of things in regard to worship, outwardly ordered by men, but at the back of it all was the hand of Satan as the god of this age - Babylon represents a great deal more on the positive side as to the dominion of a man-constituted religious order, or an earthly order of things, in the realm of worship governed by the god of this age through man - but in the midst of those conditions were those who still stood for the Lord and represented something that was not compromising with those conditions; they were dissatisfied and inwardly revolting against them.

Heart Burden.

These four books represent that something; and in every case you find the state of the vessel mentioned as being under a very great burden concerning the Lord's testimony, His interests, His Name, and His people for that Name. That is the second common factor.

I am going to stay here awhile, for it is here that ministry begins.

On the whole today, the Lord's full thought and conception is not the general thing found among His people. The testimony of the Lord has largely broken down, and the great multitude called by His Name are governed and manipulated and controlled by something that is religiously of the earth and not of the heavens, of man and not of the Holy Spirit; and there needs to be seen the impossibility of accepting that state of things.

It is one thing to recognize that and quite another thing to be in relation with the Lord's movement to recover for Himself that which is according to His mind. One can be occupied all the time with the bad state of things, bemoan it, make people feel miserable, and yet never get anywhere. That is not sufficient; I expect there were plenty in Chaldea who bemoaned things and spoke of "the good old days"! It is quite easy to do that, and in a sense be religious malcontents; but that is not being active in the Lord's recovery movement. The Lord would act in relation to this thing, and He is acting. Ezra opens with the sovereign activity of God (chapter 1:1). God acts not only from the outside, not only sovereignly, but there is something that precedes it, that makes possible His activity, that brings in the sovereignty of God.

All these who represent His vessel for dealing with the situation were men who had a great burden about the situation, and they are no use to God in a situation like that unless in the burden of it.

We see Ezra latterly spreading himself out before God in such a way that the people gathered round to see him, and when they saw his desperate concern over the state of things, they were so tremendously moved that no sooner had he finished praying than they came to him and sought to have things put right. So we see Ezra away in Jerusalem with a great burden for the Lord's testimony.

Nehemiah, away in Babylon, is seen to have a similar burden. For, having asked Hanani and his friends as to their welfare in Jerusalem, and hearing from them a report that was not good, this so burdened him that his countenance became changed, and he, knowing his life was at stake, went before the king with a

sad face - for it was criminal to go before the king with a sad countenance - yet he could not help himself for sorrow of heart over the Lord's interests and testimony, concerning the people called by His Name.

Esther, another chosen vessel unto the Lord, is likewise seen taking her life in her hands for the life of her people - these people, these whose life represents God's interests and testimony in the earth. This is the way God would have us take on His concern for His interests in the earth.

Daniel is also a man with a burden, praying three times a day, and then for three whole weeks; and what prayer it is, moving heaven and earth! He is a man with a burden; and that is where real ministry begins. God must have a vessel, an instrument brought into such sympathetic fellowship with HIM, that the conditions around of breakdown and failure become acute suffering, an agony.

Paul knew something of that "suffering for His Body's sake"; "filling up that which was lacking of the sufferings of Christ." We must face that! The thing that is going to count for God is the sharing in His travail.

There is all the romance of Christian work but that is mere glamour; all the enthusiasm and interest of organized Christian activity; but it is not what we are before men in this matter that counts, but what we are before God in the secret place, having heart concern for the Lord's testimony. Have you a burden, a passion? Is the breakdown in the Lord's testimony in the earth among those upon whom His Name is called a heartbreak to you? We shall never get anywhere till, in measure, His travail is entered into by us. Ministry, in its real, abiding, eternal value, will depend upon the measure in which the travail is entered into by us. This is a day for travail: whether it be a travail for unsaved or for the Lord's people; every true spiritual activity is born out of travail, and those who have been most used of God in every time have been men and women who had this travail in their soul, in their secret life with God. Have you got it? Perhaps you say no. Then ask the Lord to bring you into His concern, stretch yourself out before God to be brought into His burden for the time in which you live.

And so all this represents those who carry on their hearts a burden which leads them to a point where their interests have become quite secondary, and they take their life in their hands, and hold everything in relation to the Lord's own interest and His testimony, willing to let all go for God. This becomes a heart burden to be carried all the time, not merely a ministry burden. Oh! that the Lord would put this burden within us, so that wherever we are we cannot be slack. This is necessary to any real ministry. Not that we are ever to give the impression of being unhappy. There was a confidence and faith which created in these servants of God the strange, the very true paradox - "Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (II Cor. 6:10).

Beloved, that will be one of the emancipating factors in any life. The way of deliverance from oneself and from introspection is to get a share in the Lord's burden. If one might speak of one's own experience - but for the situation as it is, and the crying need and the desperate concern that the need should be met, one could any day be bound up in personal problems. Deliverance from oneself comes along the line of being concerned for the Lord's interests. You can become tied up with your own spiritual problems, and the way out is to have the burden of all God's people on your heart. That creates ministry, that means strength, that means praying. It is an emancipating thing to have the Lord's burden. Have you got it, or are you dabbling with things, toying with pebbles on the beach, instead of being out in the deep with God in His big thing? Are you just interested, or desperately concerned; just having a nice pleasant time, or really carrying God's need in His people on your heart? Are you there at all?

The Lord's Great Need - An Instrument.

The Lord must have an instrument, a Daniel instrument, whether personal or collective, that moves out towards God for His testimony. He must have a Nehemiah with a heartache over the people because of the breakdown of the testimony. He must have an Ezra who is not for a moment compromising with anything contrary to the mind of God. He must have the Esther instrument who flings fear to the winds, and goes, taking life in hand, to besiege the throne for the life of her people, for the deliverance of the people of God from the threat of the enemy. Oh! What those prayers wrought! And, beloved, the burden of the Lord must come on our heart in like manner if we are to be effective instruments for the Lord in His End-time activities; we must be exercised in a very deep way with the interests of God. We must hold back nothing that will count for the Lord and His interests. You would be surprised how the Lord would come through if you gave Him a chance.

The whole thing begins with a recognition of the need, and the burden of these things upon our hearts. When we are really in it by the urge of the Holy Spirit, the common features found in these Old Testament instruments will be found inwrought in us; and we shall be found an abandoned people unto this ONE THING - the Lord's burden and heart concern for His testimony in His people.

Second Factor: The Opposition Of The Enemy.

Then when you come into the burden you find you are in a realm of opposition, and that you are really in a battle. That is another common feature in these books; every one of them represents a situation of terrific opposition and antagonism, all combining to stop the work. Ezra - "Now our enemies." And you are not far in Esther before you find you are in a realm of conflict. And what about Daniel? The den of lions was for praying!

Now this is a stile to be cleared at once. If we are going to stand with God, for that which wholly represents His mind, we have to meet the most fierce antagonism, conflict, and pressure, from every quarter; there is going to be no method overlooked by the enemy for frustrating the end in view. Why so much antagonism? Why so much pressure? Each time when something is in view which is to count for God in relation to His End-time purpose, there it is, you meet it all the time.

Where does the Devil get his information from? He finds out when we have a message from God that is going to count, and we meet this pressure from within and without when we are in the thing that is counting for God. When it comes you must recognize that it is related to something which is to count for God. It will come through people, and if we blame the people and focus our attention on them, we have missed the point; if we begin to fight people whilst all the time it is something deeper. "Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenlies" (Eph. 6:12; A.R.V.).

People get cross with one another, and that gets on top of us, and we begin to direct our attention to them, and we get out with them and there is a distressing situation, and we see afterwards how foolish we are to allow the Devil to swing us off into a human track when it is a spiritual issue. It has not really been the fault of persons, or just inconsequential happenings; there has been a spiritual issue at stake, and all these other things were brought about and used by the enemy to occupy us with the lesser, and so blind us to the real issue, thus keeping us out of prayer, and preventing our standing with the Lord for His rights which were at some point or other being challenged.

It is the realm of unceasing conflict, and it would seem that we have come into that part of the age when the enemy takes no rest, and we find we can take no off-times. Anything you do must be done deliberately

with God, and you must never act out of, or apart from, God; that exposed movement has been watched for by the enemy, and you have to pay for it.

The Fourfold Ministry.

Recognize the fourfold aspect of the ministry of these instruments used of God. Daniel is the first to start this movement towards recovery in Babylon, and it is interesting and significant that it was started in prayer. Daniel took up the testimony of God in Babylon in prayer. God reacted through an instrument of prayer. Daniel's outlook is towards Jerusalem; he is praying that God would recover that which He has lost. His concern is for the place of the Name, and he gets through in prayer.

"From the first day that thou didst set thine heart to understand, and to humble thyself before thy God, thy words were heard: and I am come for thy words' sake. But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me one and twenty days" (Daniel 10:12-13). Through Daniel's praying hell's forces had been stirred to their depths, even to the withstanding of one of the highest archangels of Heaven - "Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me."

Do you notice Esther comes next, and it is as if the Devil said: "Daniel has prayed to get a people out and back to Jerusalem; I am going to make it impossible for them to get back," and so we see him, through wicked Haman, seeking to wipe out all the Jews, determined to have no remnant to go back.

Today the enemy is out to prevent a remnant getting out to God, by bringing death, pressure from all quarters, in such force as to almost paralyze them. God sovereignly over-rules, and the devices of Haman are brought to nought.

Then Ezra takes up the testimony, and his concern is for the House of God at Jerusalem, and Ezra, with the remnant, goes back and builds the House and sets up the Altar.

Nehemiah comes in finally - his concern is for the walls and gates of Jerusalem. He has respect for the marking off in a clear definition of what is all of God and what is not of God. He is zealous for the safeguarding of the testimony of God; see his jealous watch over the Sabbath Day: "I contended... and said... ye do... profane the sabbath day... I testified against them if ye do so again, I will lay hands on you" (Neh. 13:15-21). The Sabbath is that great testimony to the completeness of God's works. The walls speak of the mark where what is not of God ends; there is a distinct bounding, and beyond this, things are not of God, they have no place here, we shut them out. The walls represent no mixture, no over-lapping, and a clear definition. That is the message of Nehemiah.

God's Roll Of Honour.

Now we will turn to Ezra 8, and see what its value is to us.

We find a number of names are mentioned: the names of "them that went up with me from Babylon." Here you have a record of those who did absolutely separate themselves to go through with God; we have Holy Writ here, and it is as if the Holy Spirit is taking the pen and putting down the names of men who took responsibility in the testimony of God, and HE is setting down every name of the wholly devoted company who went right through with God; for the Holy Spirit would have made comment, if anyone had stopped on the way. No, these left the comparative ease and comforts of Babylon for a long and difficult journey, fraught with many dangers, and came back to a ruined city.

There is hard work, a certain amount of suffering, opposition, and so on, but they are willing to pay the cost and go through; and these are the ones whose names are severally recorded with such care, and their names will stand as long as the Bible stands; they are "Called, chosen, and faithful" wholly for God, whatever the cost.

It is fine that God should put down every name of those men who are going through. Are we going through with God? Or are we counting the cost and drawing out?

And then I notice that the next thing in the chapter is Ezra's statement: "I found none of the sons of Levi there" (Ezra 8:15).

Why was this? The Levites were those who had an inheritance only in God; they had no inheritance in the land (Joshua 14:4-5). To go to a land of desolation in which, in any case, they had no inheritance, does not look very promising, and they were getting more in Babylon than they could get there, and so the Levites could not see how they were going to get their bread and butter, and they knew they had no right to enter into the land-realm of things; and because they had no inheritance in the land, but had to trust the Lord, they stayed in Babylon. Those who had to come out and have their portion only in God, without seeing where "on earth" it is coming from, were miserably few; no Levites came out!

And is it not the same in the ministry of the Word, when you come out of a system where you are sure of your supply? It is a test of faith to have a secured position in the world of religion, and to come out and have your portion only in God, nothing in the world; and we find not many can stand up to that. So we find no Levite in that record of names.

Giving God A Chance.

The next thing is, Ezra proclaimed a fast (verses 21-23). What does this represent, spiritually? Just this - the Lord seeing you through! That is all. Oh, yes, but it is a test of faith again, for it is a journey of faith. Can the Lord see us through, had we better not ask the king? In other words, make an appeal for help to men, to the world; make sure of a safe conduct through - that is what it means; but we have taken our stand that we can go through without the resources of the world; we can count on GOD, HE will see us through; that is the testimony, beloved - GOD SEEING US THROUGH - that is our safe conduct, successful and triumphant conduct. Put in Psalms 121-134 after Ezra 8:21; notice there is a going up in them all the time, and a strong note of trust and victory; some have thought they were sung on this journey. They express that utter confidence in GOD - "As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about His people." That is something better than all the horsemen and horses of this world. The Lord can see you through. Trust HIM; don't go down to Egypt or to the king of Babylon for help; give the Lord a chance to maintain His own testimony. And so they went on this journey of faith and the Lord vindicated their confidence.

Ezra 8:24-30 deals with the deposit; the holy free-will offering to the Lord; "Watch ye, and keep them, until ye weigh them before the chiefs of the priests and the Levites, and the princes of the fathers' houses... at Jerusalem." It is blessed to regard this as the deposit which the Lord entrusts to us at the beginning. It is that of which the Apostle writes to Timothy - "Guard the deposit which is committed unto thee" (1 Tim. 6:20). The Lord has committed to the vessel for His testimony those things which represent the fulness of His salvation. You have the brass, the silver, and the gold; we know what it means, and all this is the deposit, these sacred things of "the faith once for all delivered to the saints." Those great factors of salvation - Righteousness - Redemption - and Sanctification.

You meet brass immediately you come within the Court of the Tabernacle - the Brazen Altar - with all its wonderful meaning of the wholly and fully consecrated body of the Lord Jesus to the will of God, "By the which will we are sanctified" - the whole Burnt Offering which avails for our Sanctification (Heb. 10:10). Then you have the silver of our Redemption, and the gold of that conformity to the Divine Image. That is the deposit of the faith. Jude urges the believers to whom he writes that they contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints; that is the deposit entrusted to us at the beginning, and to be handed up complete at the end of the journey. Paul could say at the end of his life, "I have kept the faith," and he handed it back at the end in the House of God complete.

It represents the ministry concerning the House of God, the whole testimony, the full Gospel. The full faith once for all delivered to the saints is entrusted to us; and it has to be enshrined within the House of God, safeguarded on the journey, and at last presented to the Lord without mixture, the clear testimony; not an iota dropped, but handed back complete.

The Lord give us grace and strength to guard our trust and present it to Him saying, "We have lost nothing, we have kept the faith, we have run the race - henceforth there is a crown of Righteousness."

All this is very good as Bible truth, but if it only goes that far, I have spoken in vain. I know the difficulty of bringing other people into one's own concern and travail. I believe you have a certain amount of perception as to how things are today; they are terrible spiritually, but there are those reaching out for more of God, and asking where they can find spiritual food.

The Lord would, I believe, do something in our day, a day of small things; and He will begin by having an instrument with a burden, with whom there is deposited the full-orbed revelation of the Lord Jesus; and who would step out in faith and trust the Lord; give the Lord a chance to vindicate Himself. May the Lord constitute us part of such an instrument and move out to others also. Ask the Lord about this matter, and, if it is true, to lay it on your heart and bring you into fellowship with HIMSELF in what He would do today.

"The hand of our GOD was upon us, and HE delivered us from the hand of the enemy and the-lier-in wait by the way... and the vessels were weighed in the house of our God... the whole by number and by weight: and all the weight was written at that time" (Ezra 8:31-34).

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