

T. Austin-Sparks:

We are going to look at the fourth chapter of Zechariah, which features in a remarkable way conditions and Divine aims in the 'end times'. There are striking similarities in it, as we shall see, to certain things mentioned in the first chapters of the Revelation. Its great value lies in its concentrated presentation of essentials. When you have these you have everything vital.

What first comes into view is -

AN ANGEL TALKING

"The angel that talked with me" (verses 1, 4). The parallel to this in the Revelation is the phrase, seven times repeated (note: seven=spiritual perfection, completeness): "what the Spirit saith to the churches".

The Lord has something to say at the end. The book of the Revelation is full of voices. It begins with: "I turned to see the voice" (1:12). A strange way of putting things! Did anyone ever see a voice? There is, however, no mistake made. A vital reality is in this seeming error, as we shall see. We have known much to be made of this "voice" factor in the Bible. True as it is that God can make Himself vocal and audible, taking up men and articulating His thoughts through them, as He has ever done, we would point out that in this case it is not the voice of man; indeed, it is not primarily the voice at all. It is that God has something to say, and a very important something.

The most pertinent question that can possibly be asked at this time is -

WHAT IS GOD SAYING TODAY?

A striking feature of our time is that so few of the voices have a distinctive message. There is a painful lack of a clear word of authority for the times. While there are many good preachers of the Gospel, and while we are not without champions of the vital verities of the Faith, we are sadly in need of the Prophet with his "Thus saith the Lord", which he has received in a commission born of a peculiarly chastened fellowship with God.

Why is it so? May it not be that so many who might have this ministry have become so much a part of a system: a system which puts preachers so largely upon a professional basis, the effect of which is to make preaching a matter of demand and supply; of providing for the established religious order and programme? And not only in the matter of preaching, but in the whole organization and activity of Christianity as we have it in the systematized form today. There is not the freedom and detachment for speaking ONLY when "the burden of the word of the Lord" is upon the prophet, or when he could say: "The hand of the Lord was upon me". The present order requires a man to speak every so often: hence he MUST get something, and this necessity means either that God must be offered our programme and asked to meet it (which He will not do), or that the preacher must MAKE something for the constantly recurring occasion.

This is a pernicious system, and it opens the door to many dangerous and baneful intrusions of what is of man and not of God. The most serious aspect of this way of things is that it results in voices, voices, voices - a CONFUSION of voices - but not the specific voice with the specific utterance of God for the time. Too often it has the effect of causing men to hear and read just with a view to getting preaching matter, subjects for sermons; the value of things is judged by their suggestiveness of themes. The man may be a godly man and the message may be the truth, but there is something more than this - is it THE message which relates to the immediate time-appointed purpose of God? There are many good men who are giving out what they know and believe of the truth, but at the same time there are many of the Lord's children who are hungry and not being fed.

The food question amongst the Lord's people today is a very acute one, and a more or less good ministry is not going to meet the need. There is a growing concern to know, as distinct from the generalisations of truth and service, what is the Lord's word for now, where we are, and what in the Divine purpose belongs to this present hour.

This brings us back to the first thing in our chapter: God has something to say; but it also leads us to the next thing: "The Angel that talked with me came again, and waked me, as a man that is wakened out of his sleep". Here we have the necessity for -

AN AWAKENING TO WHAT GOD HAS TO SAY

In the Revelation this is: "He that hath an ear, let him hear", and in the case of Laodicea - which represents the end - it is: "I counsel thee to buy of me... eyesalve... that thou mayest see" (Rev. 3:18). "I turned to see the voice which spake with me", said John. God is speaking; He has something to say; but there must be a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him; "having the eyes of your heart enlightened" (Eph. 1:17,18).

Spiritual discernment, perception, understanding and intelligence are all too rare. The causes are many. The engrossment with the work and its multifarious concerns; the rush and hurry of life; the restless spirit of the age: these, with an exhaustive provision of external religious facilities, all tend to render the inner place of Divine speaking inoperative or impossible of functioning. Perhaps we have forgotten that the Bible not only IS a revelation, but also CONTAINS a revelation, and that that deeper spiritual content is only possible of recognition and realisation by such as have had their eyes and ears opened; in other words, by those who have been awakened. Some of the Lord's most faithful servants are still only occupied with the letter of the Word, the contents of books, topics, themes, subjects, outlines, analyses, etc., and are not, IN THE DEEPEST SENSE, in spiritual understanding. (This is not meant as a criticism.) The difference too often is that between a ministry to the mind or head, and one to the heart or spirit. The former will sooner or later tire and weary both the minister and those ministered to. The latter is a ministry of life to both, and is inexhaustible in freshness.

Whether it comes at the beginning or later, it is the greatest day in our history of which we can say: "It pleased God... to reveal his Son IN me". "I received it, not from man... but by revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:15,16; 12). That is the beginning of an inwardness of things which may have many critical issues. One of these is that of which we are particularly thinking now, namely, the awakening to see what is the thought and desire of God at given and specific times. Such a revelation - through the Scriptures - is nothing less than revolutionary, and usually costly.

Would to God that there was an adequate number at this time who, like the men of Issachar, "had understanding of the times" (1 Chron. 12:32).

We now proceed to see what comes into view when God's instrument is awakened, and is able to answer the heavenly interrogation: "What seest thou?"

"BEHOLD, A CANDLESTICK ALL OF GOLD"

Every ministry in the Scriptures appointed by God was constituted upon something having been SEEN. The test of a Divine commission may be found in this question, "What seest thou?", and the answer, upon the basis of God having shown something very concrete, may well provide the credentials. It is not the matter of winning the sermon or winning the audience, but declaring the truth for the time as it has been made a fire in the bones. It would be pertinent, rather than impertinent, to challenge the servants of God with this question, relative to the time in which they live, and relative to the immediate concern of God - "What seest thou?"

There is no doubt that what God has seen at all times as His objective is "a candlestick all of gold", but from time to time there has been a special necessity for Him to bring it into the view of the people, and especially of His prophets. It is for this that He reacts, and the end-time must see a renewal of His reaction.

Now, ignoring the fact that there is a difference between the seven-branched candlestick or lampstand of the Old Testament, and the seven lampstands of the Apocalypse, there is a relationship of the two in a common principle. That common principle is that they both represent -

THE INSTRUMENT OF THE TESTIMONY IN THE HOUSE OF GOD

While that innermost light of the Most Holy Place - the light of Christ in the presence of God - remains un-dimmed and inviolate, there is that which is midway between Heaven and earth - the Holy Place - where the testimony has to be kept clear both Godward and man-ward. Concerning this - as differing from the other - God has given very careful and explicit instructions and injunctions for its perpetual maintenance. He is peculiarly jealous over this testimony. Thus, we find that it is here in the sphere of this, that the prayer-life (Altar of incense) and the feeding-fellowship (Table of shewbread) of the Lord's people have their true value and vitality.

The instructions for the making of the Candlestick in Exodus 25 and 37 are full of the richest significance. First

in these is the material — "pure gold". If it is to have a SEVENFOLD fullness, intensity and expression, which refers to spiritual completeness, then it must be pre-eminently suitable to the Divine purpose. The meaning of the "all of gold", then, is that it is —

ABSOLUTELY ACCORDING TO GOD

Be sure to get the force of this: an instrument of the testimony wholly according to God! There is only One who is thus wholly according to God's mind and heart - the Lord Jesus, and if the whole Tabernacle in every part came firstly from God and then was Christ in type throughout, then this lampstand speaks of a vessel of the testimony of God in which the Lord Jesus is absolute and complete. God would have everything according to Christ. This fact governs the whole revelation in the Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation. It is typified and prophesied in the Old Testament. It is presented in the Gospels; demonstrated in the Acts; defined in the Epistles; and consummated in the Revelation. But, alas, what a tragic and heart-breaking history is associated with this fact, and how difficult has it ever been to get anything wholly according to Christ.

In an earlier chapter we saw God's reactions to this in Bible times, and suggested that since then He has again and again so reacted.

The Reformation was such a reaction, and by it He recovered the great foundational truth of Justification by Faith; which puts Christ into His absolute place as the Chief Cornerstone of the House of God. It was a grand thing, though very costly. But all too soon men pulled it down to the earth, and the 'Protestant Church' as such issued; a tree in the branches of which almost every kind of credal bird can lodge. Protestantism, as such, is by no means a synonym for what is wholly according to Christ.

Since then the reactions of the Lord have been seen in many other instances.

The Moravian Brethren, through a great fight and affliction, were used to recover the great truth of the Church's responsibility for the testimony of Jesus in all the nations. Not the responsibility of a missionary society or adjunct to the Church, but of the Church itself directly. This was, and is, wholly according to Christ. But again, human hands mould this movement into a 'church' with all the outward elements of a religious order. There is no question but that there has been considerable spiritual loss.

A further reaction of God was seen in the Wesleys and Whitfield. Here, in addition to a mighty recovering of soul-saving evangelism, there was the recovery of the doctrine of practical holiness. This was grand while the instrument remained; but alas there came those human hands again, and an earthly organizing into a system - the 'Wesleyan Church'. We are perfectly sure that Wesley would not have wished this.

Then about a hundred years ago, there was what all ought to recognise as a movement of God in the shape of the 'Plymouth Brethren'. There were several most precious recoveries made in this instance. The Lord Jesus was given an exclusive place which was not common in those days, nor is it common now. The great truth concerning the Body of Christ - the One Church - was brought again into view, after perhaps centuries of obscurity. God was in this, and is still in it, but the most ardent devotee to this community is both grieved and ashamed to contemplate its divisions today. Is it that men have again been insinuated or have insinuated themselves? Has this, like so much more, been taken into the governing hands of men? Has that subjective work of the Cross, by which in a very deep way man is cut off and the Holy Spirit governs, failed of adequate application or acceptance here? These are questions, not charges; we are seeking to speak, not destructively, but constructively.

Many more are the reactions of God through the past nineteen centuries; we only use these by way of illustration. It will be seen that each fresh movement was an advance upon those that preceded it in the matter of truth recovered: from the Divine standpoint it was a movement nearer to the original position. The big question which at once arises is: Will the Lord do a new thing yet? Are we to know of a fresh reaction to His first position? The only answer we can give to this question is that, whether or not there should be anything in the nature of a movement as open to general recognition, we are certain that there is a more or less hidden movement on the part of the Spirit of God, working through deepening dissatisfaction with things as they are toward that which is nearer the original thought than has been since the beginning. It will be such a thing as cannot be 'joined' by men, but in which only those will share who are moved by deep inward exercise, so that it becomes a matter of a common spiritual travail.

What next comes before us in Zechariah's vision, which is more than Jewish, but has that invariable double application of Old Testament revelation, is —

THE TWO OLIVE TREES AND THE TWO ANOINTED ONES

The symbolism here is familiar. Two is the number of testimony or witness. Trees are very often symbolic of man as witness, or men as witnesses. The olive, as is apparent in this chapter, especially relates to the oil. The position of these two trees is on either side of the candlestick. From verse 14 we learn that "These are the two anointed ones (sons of oil), that stand by the Lord of the whole earth".

There is no doubt that the two olive trees bring into view, firstly and historically, Joshua the High Priest and Zerubbabel the Governor. Chapter 3 deals with the one and chapter 4 with the other. The first discourse concerned the High Priesthood and its ministry; the second (4:1) concerns the Government or sovereignty. This, interpreted prophetically, relates to the Lord Jesus. His High Priestly work and position come first into view, and are established in glory; then He is established by God as Lord and Sovereign Head. On these two sides of His one Person He ever gives the meaning of the candlestick: that is, He defines the nature of its vocation, and supplies the unfailing resource for that testimony. It is, as we have said, constituted according to Christ, and maintained by Him in all the fulness of His anointing.

The Divine explanation of this is: "This is the word of Jehovah unto Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts" (verse 6). Here we reach the central meaning of the vision as to the execution of the purpose of God. It speaks for itself. Its clear affirmation is that this instrument and this testimony must be utterly in the hands of the Holy Spirit. Not might, nor power, of brain, will, emotion, organization, machinery, committee, influence, reputation, numbers, name, personality, outfit, enthusiasm, etc., but solely the Holy Spirit! The accounting for this will never be, IN TRUTH - whatever superficial observers may say - attributable to any human force or resource, but all who have any spiritual intelligence will have to recognise that its energy and power is Divine. This will also be proved by its endurance and persistence through the intense fires of opposition and antagonism.

Here the Holy Spirit is allowed to govern and dictate, to direct and choose or reject, just as in the "Acts" at the beginning. To have such an instrument and such a testimony there will need to be a very revolutionary re-shaping of ideas. It will be necessary to realise that all those things, upon which men have come to count as most important factors in the Lord's work, are really not necessary factors at all. It will have to be recognised that education, personal ability, business ability, worldly wisdom, money, etc. AS SUCH have nothing to do with the work of the Holy Spirit or with Christianity. The Lord may use these, call them in, and if they are kept in their right place they may serve Him greatly; but they are secondary, and He can easily dispense with them. It is of infinitely greater importance and value that men should be filled with the Holy Spirit, and if a choice is to be made, this should ever be the very first consideration. There is a wisdom, judgment, discernment, knowledge, understanding by the Holy Spirit which alone is equal to the demands of that which alone is to be wholly according to God.

Thus the Lord Jesus, as the Great Mediator and Sovereign Head, would maintain His testimony wholly in accordance with His own nature and mind in the fullness of the Spirit of His own anointing. When things are thus there is no need to be unduly oppressed by -

THE GREAT MOUNTAIN

"Who art thou, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain" (verse 7). The mountain is a figure of the accumulation of difficulties. The completing of the House of God will be no less fraught with difficulty and obstruction than the commencement; but, as then, so at the end, where the Holy Spirit is absolute Lord, these difficulties will be proved rather complementary than otherwise. The "many adversaries" will only be sovereignly used to further, rather than arrest, the consummation of "the eternal purpose".

"The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house, his hands shall also finish it" (verse 9). The Greater Zerubbabel laid those foundations at Pentecost. The finishing will be by His hands alone. The same glorious Lord Jesus will "bring forth the top-stone with shoutings of Grace, grace, unto it".

Then there is presented for our contemplation, by way of an interrogation, a matter which is indeed very challenging -

THE DAY OF SMALL THINGS.

"Who hath despised the day of small things?" (verse 10). There is amongst the Lord's people in these days

an unhealthy lust for big things. Something to attract attention; a demonstration to capture, an appearance to impress. Big names, big places, big titles, big sounds, big movements, big sweeps! If the dimensions are big according to men's standards, the success is judged accordingly.

In order to obtain and maintain that which will preserve the recognition of wholly Divine factors, God has ever found it necessary to reduce. End-times are always days of small things: see the testimony in the Revelation - it is only represented by the few who 'overcome'. Bigness is material or temporal. Greatness is spiritual and eternal. Too often men - even Christians - despise that in which God delights. The significance of things according to God is so often seen in an "upper room", as over against the whole city, but the city succumbs to the upper room. When dealing with the "world rulers of this darkness" the Lord has frequently made an upper room His Throne-room.

"These seven eyes of Jehovah shall rejoice when they see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel" (verse 10). What is this? The seven eyes symbolize the perfection of spiritual vision, which takes in everything as it is. The plummet is that by which crookedness is brought to light and made manifest. When Jehovah sees the Lord Jesus with that instrument in His hand, which so represents His own standard that by it He can correct all that deviates, and expose all the unsuspected leanings, bulgings, angles, and dangers of that which is related to His House; when He has that instrument by which He can make manifest how His House should be built according to Christ - then His perfect spiritual vision will rejoice and be satisfied. This is what He needs. O, that we might be to Him such an instrument! It will not be a popular ministry; it will cost; but it will be precious to the Lord.

As we close, let us just note the names of the Lord in this chapter. The purpose as in view is related to Jehovah - the Almighty, Eternally Self-Sufficient One (verses 6, 10). The executing and sufficiency of the purpose is related to Jehovah-Sabaoth - the Lord of Hosts (verse 6). The place of the testimony is related to Adon - Master, or Lord (verse 14); that is, He who owns and has the rights of proprietorship.