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Sermon preached by Mr J K Popham at Galeed
Chapel, Brighton on Sunday morning 21 December 1919

TEXT: ZECHARIAH 8 verse 6

Thus saith the Lord of Hosts: If it be marvellous in the
eyes of the remnant of this people in these days
should it also be marvellous in mine eyes?
saith the Lord of Hosts

The captivity, 70 years captivity, had ended. God had raised up, first of all Ezra, then came Nehemiah, and the people returned, began to build, and they prospered through the prophecy of Haggai and Zechariah, the son of Berechiah the son of Iddo, this Zechariah. The people had broken through the hedge of God's statutes, and of the limitations placed upon them by divine commandment; had despised and rejected God and turned to idolatry, and were guilty of gross wickedness. And first of all God began to send prophets to them saying in His prophets "O do not this wickedness" but they went on frowardly in the way of their own hearts, and after the gods of the nations round about them. Then the Lord removed the ten tribes and scattered them according to His threatening. Then Nebuchadnezzar came against Jerusalem and captured it and carried away captive the people and the vessels of the house of the Lord and put them in the house of his gods. And the captivity was long, it was 70 years, and the people were told, the people of Israel were told to build houses and to marry, because the captivity was long and to pray for the peace of the cities where they dwelt, for in the peace therein they themselves should have peace. And so they lived and saw plenty of gods, gods of wood and stone. Then they knew God's breach of His promise; then they knew what His service was in the lack of it, and they were sore days. And, as you have it in the Lamentations, the gates of the city were broken and black and the walls were thrown down and the people would have given all they had for meat to relieve their soul. And Jerusalem, in the days of her captivity and of her misery, remembered all her pleasant things. She remembered the sabbaths which she had despised, and one lesson one may draw here, is this, that it is a

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very solemn thing for the saints of God to sin under the gospel and they will find sooner or later that God is very jealous, because He is full of love. His jealousy comes out of His love. They will find that it is no light thing to sin. You who fear His name, if you sin persistently, I mean if you backslide, if the world catches you, if you run after its vanities, you do, in spirit, just what Israel did, you go after idols and you provoke the eyes of God's jealousy and you will find that captivity will bring you to your senses, but wont bring liberty. It will bring you to remember your pleasant things which now are gone, and the sabbaths which, in the Spirit, you enjoyed, but it wont restore liberty. For a time you will understand what that is in the spirit - you would give all your pleasant things for meat to relieve your soul. The long captivity came to an end, and according to God's appointment, Cyrus made a proclamation that everyone who was willing had liberty to return to their own land. Some returned, others did not. A very solemn thing to be willing to remain in the land of captivity, and many professors are like that. And then Nehemiah was raised up according to God's direction. There came certain men to him. He names one of them, Hanani. He names him and says that he and the men who were with him reported upon the state of Jerusalem and the condition of the people; that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down, that the gates thereof were burned and the people were in great affliction and reproach. The time had come when they were feeling their condition, for when God will work, He works mightily, and He works in different ways, and stirs up the hearts of His people to seek Him. And Nehemiah, as we are told, prayed unto the God of heaven, and the king, whose cup-bearer he was, was touched. The finger of God touched him. God is never lacking for means. Kings who know Him not shall serve Him when He is to be served. And so the king gave orders for the protection and well-being of Nehemiah, the servant of God; sent with him letters that he might be helped by those beyond the river and, as we read in the chapters this morning, the hand of his God was upon him for good. Zechariah was one of those two prophets whose prophesying encouraged the people so that they went on building and prospered, and in this His prophecy, are very remarkable things. Some literally fulfilled, others of a spiritual nature.

Jerusalem was to be restored, and was restored, and there came that outward prosperity to Jerusalem which is spoken of in this chapter. And after the restoration the Jews never again sank into their former gross idolatries, but they sank into a carnal security, and into formality which went on and on until the appearance of the promised Seed, Jesus Christ. And Haggai reproves this their ease "Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your ceiled houses and this House of the Lord lie waste?" Zechariah here promises by the mouth of God, good things. O so low were the people, so desolate was the city, that naturally speaking, his prophesying such good things would seem to be a sort of mockery, and the Lord moves him. Yes, these words "Thus saith the Lord of Hosts, if it be marvellous, wonderful, beyond hope, in your eyes; if you are unable to imagine that these broken down walls, this desolate city, this house that lies waste, if it seems too wonderful that ever there should be a repairing, re-building, and prosperity, should it be also marvellous in Mine eyes, saith the Lord of Hosts. If it is too much for you to hope, is it too much for Me to accomplish? Do you measure Me by yourselves? This was limiting the Holy One of Israel, and we know that the House of the Lord was re-built, that the city did prosper, that it was literally true, that there were old men and old women dwelling there in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for very age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof. This was done.

Now, leaving this natural part of it, let us, as we may be enabled by the Holy Spirit, try to gather some useful lessons of a spiritual kind. It does not seem at all wrong to say that there is, and has been for some time, a sad sight to the eyes of God and to spiritual people, a breaking down of walls, and burning of gates, and Jerusalem has been desolate, and is desolate. And coming home to ourselves it may be that some of us have to say just that, that we are not as we were, that we need God to do something for us, and yet there may be moments when our desolation appears to be so great. Our lack of access to God and worship of Him, His distance from us, all appear to be so tremendous, so sad in the effects of them, as that we may be apt

to say - can we really hope that we shall ever be restored, ever brought to a good state, a prosperous condition again. And if it is so, it may be a blessing for us to have brought to us, what God is able to do. And I would set that before you, the gracious ability of God, that what is an impossibility with us is nothing for Him. That there is with Him love, and grace, and power, and goodness, and faithfulness, and the covenant ordered in all things and sure, and that the things we need to have done for us, which sometimes it would seem impossible to be done, He is able to accomplish in a moment. To say - "Let there be" and it will be. If it be marvellous in the eyes of the remnant of this people in these days, is it marvellous to think that the waste places and desolate heritages in your souls should be restored, that again the holy familiarity and fellowship with God you once enjoyed, that fervent love you felt, that hope in the mercy of God, that tenderness of conscience that marked you, and made you careful in your walk, that this should ever be restored, seeing you have sinned them all away; that you have broken through the statutes and precepts and commandments of the holy gospel; of Jesus Christ. Does it seem to you too much to hope? You may think perhaps - well, if the Lord should take me to heaven, and I hope He will, how can I look for familiarity any more here? If He should take me to heaven, how can I expect to live again under His smile in this world seeing I have behaved myself so basely, seeing I have not cared for the wet lock, the bedewed head of Jesus Christ? Seeing I have treated Him so basely, how can I think that He will come again and bless me, as He did at the first, and your reflections may be very painful, very painful indeed, You may reflect upon the enormity of your sins done since the Lord blessed you. That, I think, often is one of the most painful of all things to God's people. I know in my own case, sins done before He looked on me and dealt with me are as nothing compared with sins committed since. They were put away; these are accumulative things. They are not charged again; these are brought home. They are buried, these are before my eyes. You may be saying the same thing. O my brethren, it is no light thing to sin against the love of God, against the blood of Christ, against the gospel made known by the Holy Spirit. It is no light thing to have walked in that hardness of heart against

which the Apostle Paul speaks "Take heed, lest there be in any of you, an evil heart of unbelief" and you should harden your hearts as in the day of provocation. Sin is of a hardening nature. Sin is most desolating. It provokes the eyes of God's glory; it hardens the conscience; it gets easier as we go on until the rebukes of God stop us; it is a very grievous thing, and when we are reflecting in the way I am just speaking, then nothing seems more difficult than for us to conclude that we are christians at all. It seems so impossible at times to think that anyone blessed with the fear of God could do such and such things, and yet we have done them, and so we are brought almost to conclude that we never had the life of God imparted, never had the fear of God put into our hearts. Do I speak altogether a strange language to all of you? I should not think so. Now the restoration then seems so difficult and all but impossible when you look at these things, when you regard yourself and we are very apt to be lost for a time in this regarding of self, very apt to be looking at the power of sin and our own weakness and inability to resist it. To look at the ravages of sin and our own inability to restore the waste places and the desolate places Well, Hart's advice is very good here

Pour not on thyself too long
Lest it sink thee lower
Look to Jesus kind as stong
Mercy joined with power

May the faith of God's own operation be in exercise in our hearts to enable us to follow that good gospel advice.

And now I would bring before you that, that the Lord speaks concerning Himself. Let us turn from our miserable, wicked, fickle, foolish, base self, and turn to a good and gracious God as He sets Himself forth in these words - "Should it also be marvellous in Mine eyes saith the Lord of Hosts". And here there are many things that might be considered by us as the Lord might help us as first, speaking generally, the omnipotence of God. What can He not do? "I make all things new" He says. It is said of Him, that "He reneweth the face of the earth". His promise is

"O My people, I will open your graves, and I will bring you up out of your graves". This is what God says. Captivity was to the Israelites, a grave. Your captivity may be a grave to you. You seem like a buried person, no liberty to go to God, though you use the form. Like a buried person, hardly breathing, hardly wanting; hungry and hardly aware of it sometimes. Now says the Lord - should the restoration indeed be marvellous to Me because it is marvellous to you? Should it appear to Me an impossibility because it appears so to you? Look at this great contrast. Here is omnipotence, sinner. Do you need anything that God is not able to do, any restoration that He has not power to effect? Do you need love that He has not to give, pardons that He has not to bestow, mercy which He cannot communicate? Omnipotence can do all things. "I make all things new". But there is more than omnipotence implied in this word. There is, let me mention, first of all the covenant promise of God. "I will bring again that which was driven away. I will seek that which was lost. I will bind up that which was broken." This is the Lord's covenant promise to poor sinners who are to be restored. There was a limit to the captivity of Israel and when that limit was reached, then were raised up, mercifully raised up, instruments to bring about that return, the restoration and the re-building of Jerusalem, and the setting up of the altar and the sacrifices renewed there. And so there is a limit put by God to the backslidings and the captivities of His children when the dust of Zion is to be favoured, when the Lord shall again gather the outcasts and the people shall meet to worship Him and when they shall find the Lord's merciful presence, and the re-building of their souls, as Newton has it - "Thou shalt be re-built anew" It is a great thing this, in the covenant of grace, seventy years of captivity. Not an unlimited time, but a limited time - 70 years. The land should enjoy its sabbaths, but there should come an end to that awful captivity, and so there comes a time when the Lord puts a limit and an end to the backslidings and the captivities and the deaths of his children and it is not marvellous in His eyes, because He has made a covenant promise. He has made a covenant to do. He never promises more than He is able to perform. Some of us understand painfully, we understand painfully a captive state, a bad condition, broken down walls,

and burned gates, and the service of God not conducted in the Spirit. Form indeed kept up perhaps, but no spiritual motion, no worship of the living God. Blessed be God, there came a time when He would put an end to that condition and He did, and although it is well remembered by some of us, how impossible it did seem that ever there should be a renewal of former days, yet that renewal of former days did come. O what a God we some of us have proved Him to be. There not only is the covenant but there is this also, His eternal love. "I have loved thee with an everlasting love, therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee". And in His love and in His pity He saved the very people who grieved and vexed His Holy Spirit so that He was turned to be their enemy and fought against them. You think of it, God in His love and in His pity turning again to people who had turned from Him and had vexed Him and had grieved His Holy Spirit, so that He was turned against them and He began to fight against them. Has the Lord done this to you? You may remember how He fought against you with the two-edged sword that went out of His mouth. Have you found Him drawing you in His love and in His pity coming to heal you? This is engaged, the precious everlasting love of God is engaged, to bring His people out of their captivity. And further there is this ability, namely, the powerful, the invaluable blood of Christ. O that precious blood, that plea that is given to us to make and use, that blood that can wash out every stain, every sin. That blood that can bring the soul near again, that has got far off through sin. "Is there anything too hard for this blood to accomplish in the removal of all hypocrisy and guile and malice and hardness and waywardness? No. One of the worst things you may ever have to confess may be this, your persistence in backsliding, or provoking the eyes of God's glory, in backsliding. And you may sometimes say, I wonder if there ever was a person who provoked the Lord as I have provoked Him. If you turn to Hosea, you will find some who did it; some who, though there was a hedge about them, said they would go after their lovers, it was better with them, than now they were brought into affliction. Oh but says the Lord, they shall not find their paths. And you would find your way to do it. Yea, He says, because of the persistence of this people in their determination to go after their lovers, I will build a wall of hewn stone round

about her, and because He would have her to Himself, He said this "I will allure her and bring her into the wilderness". She shall not only not find her paths, but she shall willingly forsake them, and give up trying to find them. I will allure her by My mercy. I will draw her by My lovingkindness. I will draw her with the bands of a man with the cords of love into the wilderness and there I will speak comfortably to her, and all is by the blood of the covenant. As for them also, you have it in this prophecy, by the blood of Thy covenant have I sent forth Thy prisoners from the pit wherein is no water. You may find no water to relieve your souls, but God will send you out of the pit and give you living water.

There is in the next place on this point, let me continue, there is the blessed gift of the renewing of the Holy Ghost. O His renewing, His coming afresh, His coming to you when you cannot pray, when you feel distant, cut off, shut out, hard, all but prayerless, glad even to feel a prayer for a prayer in your spirit. Then this promised Holy Ghost will come and - "I will pour upon the house of David and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication. And they shall look upon Him whom they have pierced" Come again and see that dear Saviour whom once they looked upon with wondering eyes, and cried after with weeping eyes, and broken hearts. O it is wonderful to have the Holy Ghost given again. "Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation" "Restore unto me Thy free Spirit". "Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me". These are cries that God puts into the hearts of His people whom He will restore. If then these things belong to the Lord God, if the blessed Trinity is this God I have mentioned, faithful, good, powerful, full of mercy, a covenant God, a promise-making and promise performing God to His children, should it be wonderful that He, He this blessed One, should do what nature says cannot be done, and bring people into a state into which they may think they can never be brought.

Now let us look in the next place, a little at this blessed restoration. It is not to be marvellous in God's eyes, and it is to be a truth in our own eyes and our own experience. The winter

state is to end. The beloved of our souls is to say - "Come with Me My sister; the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the flowers appear on the earth, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land. Come with Me". That does it. This is the restoring of the waste places when the winter is past, when the desolation, so bitter, is to end. When the backsliding is to be forgiven, when a person is to find several particular things wrought in him as, first, a renewing of faith in its operations. Faith is that great grace in the soul that lives and labours under load, though damped it never dies. But its actings are often very feeble and sometimes seem to be all but suspended. Perhaps some of you understand me in this. I mean (children of God) when faith seems all but dead, now it has moved again and I say this - God once more becomes real to you, Christ becomes real, the Holy Ghost becomes real. It is no fancy; there is a God in heaven and faith says - I see Him. There is Christ in heaven and faith says - I see Him. There is a Holy Ghost in heaven and the faith of the soul says 'Come' 'O come Thou blessed Spirit, come to me and deal mercifully with me' It is a great thing for faith to be in exercise. Without faith it is impossible to please God, for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and it is not enough for the people of God to have once believed that He is. They must be constantly believing He is or else they are not constantly praying. If faith droops, prayer dies. If faith is inactive, there is nothing but form in the soul's approaches to God, nothing but form. So, when a person is to be restored, faith is in exercise. O what a mercy it is that faith is moving and when she is in exercise then the sinner is not indifferent to God. Lord, wilt Thou forgive these dreadful sins of mine, and assure my heart by the blood of Christ that all is put away, that there is nothing now between Thyself and my soul? This is an experience that people who have been far off want to have. And as they are very far off they cry mightily for it and find no rest in their souls until the Lord does come to them. One of the worst sins you may have at times is this, that you are more or less content to go on like the captives who did not return when they had liberty given to them. The chief of the fathers and the princes went back, but many did not go back. They were charged to

help those who did with their gold and silver, but it was a solemn thing to remain in captivity when they had liberty to return to Jerusalem. Many professors are willing to help the Lord's people, for they are inclined to do it by God, but there is no heart to face the difficulties of returning, and hence they are asleep in the land of captivity. But, when living souls, true children of God, are sobered by the Spirit, then it is that their faith rises and they go and pray to the God of heaven. Ezra faced great difficulties in returning and he was ashamed to ask protection of the king, and when the difficulties were many, what did he do? He proclaimed a fast, that he and all with him might seek the Lord and afflict their souls and seek help at His blessed hand and God heard them and He was entreated of us, and that is just the motion of faith, when people are moved toward God in faith. They face difficulties, they see broken down walls, burnt gates, the lack of worship, the altar broken down, and God far off and His glory removed. They see it all.