

**BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD**

—*J. van Dijk*

But for the grace of God which spoke the words of Genesis 3:15, the world would have found an untimely but deserved end right then and there.

But for the grace of God in Noah's days, all life on this globe would have been extinguished (Gen. 6:3,7,13).

But for the grace of God there remained no hope for the Gentiles at Babel; God chose Abram; the Gentiles had had their chance (Gen. 11;12).

But for the grace of God, God's judgment would have fallen on man in the early days of our present calendar. But God found Himself a Ransom (Job 33:24).

By the grace of God, the world has been maintained from its early days. And now there are Christians who call the time since Pentecost "the day of Grace." How can they do that?

Let us begin with an example. Paul says that the glory of the ministry in days past is not glory when viewed in the light of the surpassing glory of today's ministry of the cross of Christ (2 Cor. 3:9-10). To understand this, one has to know what God taught in the Old Testament, and how much richer (although not conflicting) the message in the New is.

If we grasp this, we are well on the way to understand why many speak of "the day of Grace." A concordance shows that the word *grace* occurs three times as often in the New Testament as in the three-times-longer Old Testament. And John 1 shows that grace (and truth) came by Jesus Christ. Many such thoughts could be mentioned, but I like to deepen our appreciation of this grace and its effect.

As said above, when God called Abram, it was because the Gentiles had had their chance. God then chose a special people for Himself. How this people failed we know; they crucified the Lord of glory. This causes many believers to say that God will give no further opportunity to Israel. But this is a hasty conclusion, for if God reckoned thus, it would have sad consequences for ourselves.

When the Lord Jesus was crucified, the responsibility for world affairs rested with the Gentiles. It was the time of the Gentiles. According to God's reckoning, our Lord was crucified under the responsibility of the Gentiles, and Pilate's permission verifies the truth of it. Thus the Gentiles are certainly not less guilty than Israel, sooner more. Both had their period of testing: the Gentiles until Babel; Israel until the exile. Finally, both sealed their fate by their combined effort to get rid of the Lord.

And now? But for the grace of God! God has done a wondrous thing, He has given the Gentiles another chance! What undeserved grace this is! Why should God have done so? Reverently speaking, there were no promises to man (but see Ti. 1:2) that He was "obliged" to fulfil. It simply was pure grace. Even then, we understand so little the extent of God's grace that God has to remind us that it is His goodness (His grace) that leads us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). Even our turning to God was not of our own desire. All is grace. Would then the name "day of Grace" be inappropriate for a time of such unprecedented grace?

And can anyone who understands what grace we, Gentiles, have received say that God will not do for Israel what He has done for us Gentiles, and maintain this despite God's promise of the New Covenant to that nation (Dt. 30:1-14; Isa. 55; 59; 61; Jer. 50)?

**MYSTERIES (1)**

—*H. Bouter Jr.*

In this series we want particularly to look at those New Testament mysteries, or hidden things, which relate to the Church or the Assembly.

"We speak God's wisdom in [a] mystery, that hidden [wisdom] which God had predetermined before the ages for our glory" (1 Cor. 2:7).

"Let a man so account of us as servants of Christ, and stewards of [the] mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1).

Through the Word God's Spirit has revealed the mysteries of God. No one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God, but God has been pleased to make known the things that filled His heart by His Spirit. The great content of these hidden things is Christ and the Assembly. From all eternity, God occupied Himself with this subject, with His beloved Son and the Assembly, which would be united with Him. Now, the Holy Spirit, who came down after Christ had been glorified at God's right hand, has inspired the apostles to reveal these hidden thoughts of God. What grace, that we have thus been acquainted with that which lives in God's heart, His deepest thoughts!

No wonder these things are called mysteries, they have a hidden character. For God's thoughts relating to Christ and the Assembly, as being His body, were never revealed in the Old Testament. There might, however, be a second reason why the New Testament stresses so greatly their hidden character. These are matters that can only be known *by faith*. Their glory is still not visible; only when Christ appears will their full glory be seen.

### *The mystery of God's will*

Christ is the centre of God's thoughts. God has put Him over all things. The first man, Adam, failed. But God has found His delight in the second Man, Christ, and has exalted Him to be Head over all things. That is the mystery of His will. He has subjected all things to Christ (Eph. 1:10,22). But today this is still a mystery. The dominion of Christ has still to be manifested. We see not yet all things subjected to *Him*, but we see Jesus..., crowned with glory and honour at God's right hand, waiting till His enemies will be put as footstool for His feet (Heb. 2).

But God has announced this mystery of His will to the Assembly, for the Assembly shares with Christ in the dominion over all things. The Assembly is the body of Christ, she is one with Him who is the Head of the new creation. The Assembly will be united with Christ in His dominion. Christ will not rule over her, she will rule *with* Christ. The Assembly is His body, inseparably united with Him. Therefore believers are, in Him, heirs of all that is His. For this reason God acquaints the co-heirs with all that He has given to the Heir. "Having made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself for [the] administration of the fullness of times; to head up all things in the Christ, the things in the heavens and the things upon the earth; in Him, in whom we have also obtained an inheritance, being marked out beforehand according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His own will, that we should be to [the] praise of His glory... And has put all things under His feet, and gave Him [to be] Head over all things to the Assembly, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Eph. 1:9-12; 22:23).

### *The mystery of piety*

Christ is also the essence of this mystery: "And confessedly the mystery of piety is great. God has been manifested in flesh, has been justified in [the] Spirit, has appeared to angels, has been preached among [the] nations, has been believed on in [the] world, has been received up in glory" (1 Tim. 3:16). We see in First Timothy that this mystery relates to the truth of the house of God. To be truly the "house of God," Christ must have the place due to Him. *He* is the centre of the testimony that flows from his house. His Person and His work must be present in the hearts of the believers. *He* is the mystery of piety, or godliness, in the service of God. *He* is the mystery of the faith that must be held in a pure conscience (3:9). Only where He is manifested through believers does it become visible who God is and where He lives.

Christ is the centre of the truth proclaimed by the Assembly. His divinity and His Manhood, united as they are in one Person, are acknowledged and admired by faith. God has been revealed in flesh. Thus He became the second Man, the last Adam. And the Holy Spirit acknowledged and sealed His perfect Humanity: "Justified in Spirit." The angels admired Him and served Him. In Him they saw God's wondrous wisdom: "Seen of angels." In Him the grace of God was revealed to a lost world. The salvation that was sent in Him did not restrict itself to the Jews: "Preached among [the] nations." Thus He became the subject of faith in this world. His glory isn't yet visibly revealed. Yet, He is glorified at God's right hand on the basis of His work of salvation. One day He will return to assume His government, but we are even now connected with a glorified Lord. He is the Subject of our faith: "Believed on in the world, has been received up in glory."

### *The mystery of Christ and the Assembly*

The Lord has entrusted the preaching of this mystery to the Apostle Paul. The Lord Jesus called him from heaven. Paul did not know Him according to the flesh, as did the other apostles. He learned to know Him as the glorified Lord. That, however, is not all; the Lord in heaven has a body on earth, of which He is the Head. The individual members of the body are the believers from among the Jews and from among the nations. The Holy Spirit has united them into one body and to Christ as Head of this body.

Silence was kept as to this mystery "in the times of the ages, but [it] has now been made manifest, and by prophetic Scriptures [of the New Testament]... made known for obedience of faith to all the nations" (Rom. 16:25-26).

Through special revelation Paul had learnt this mystery "which in other generations had not been made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets." He brought to light "what is the administration of the mystery hidden throughout the ages in God (Eph. 3:2-12). This mystery dealing with Christ and the Assembly is great (Eph. 5:32).

The revelation of this mystery signals even the completion of God's Word. For this mystery was "hidden from ages and from generations, but has now been made manifest to His saints; to whom God would make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the nations" (Col. 1:25-27).

In Colossians the accent is on Christ Himself as being the essence of the mystery: "Which is Christ in you the hope of glory" (1:27). In Colossians 4 the apostle asks for prayer for His announcing the "mystery of Christ" (v. 3). Yet Colossians 2 speaks also of the "mystery of God" (v. 2), for God is its origin, it was hidden in God from all ages, as Ephesians 3 expresses it.

In Ephesians the accent is more on the Assembly as the contents of this mystery. Her special place as one body, one new man, and her relation to Christ as Head of this body is the subject there. Colossians mentions the body but it focuses all attention on the Head. Christ is the Head of the body, the Assembly (1:18), and the believers are called to hold Him fast as Head (2:19).

Also in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 the apostle speaks extensively about the Assembly as the body of Christ. There is only one body of Christ. All believers have been baptized by one Spirit into one body. All believers in a certain place form the local expression of that body. Thus Paul can say to the Corinthians, "Ye are Christ's body, and members in particular" (12:27).

Although we cannot now enter into details on the following, we would like to point out that the *Lord's supper is the means whereby the oneness of the body is practically experienced*. It is remarkable that only Paul mentions the Lord's supper in his epistles, and that only in I Corinthians. The one loaf speaks of the one body: "Because we, [being] many, are one loaf, on body; for we all partake of that one loaf (10:17). The bread of the Lord's supper is therefore the symbol of the one body. By eating of that bread, I proclaim to have part in the body of Christ. The bread, therefore, does not just remind us of the Person of Christ going into death (of which the broken bread speaks), but it reminds us too of the body of which Christ is the Head, which the Spirit formed on the day of Pentecost.

### *The mystery of the Assembly's completion*

The apostle Paul did not only speak of the essence and character of the Assembly during the present age but also of its glorious future. Thus God's Spirit used him to announce all the counsel of God (Acts 20:27). The Assembly will be completed in two stages which will follow each other immediately:

- the resurrection of the departed believers;
- the changing of the living believers.

Both groups will be made conformable to their glorified Lord to be united to Him forever. Then, the oneness of the Lord and His own, which now is a spiritual reality, will be actually visible.

"Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all fall asleep, but we shall all be changed, in an instant, in [the] twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead in Christ shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed" (1 Cor. 15:51-52).

"For this we say to you in [the] word of [the] Lord, that *we*, the living, who remain to the coming of the Lord, are in no way to anticipate those who have fallen asleep; for the Lord Himself, with an assembling shout, with archangel's voice and with trump of God, shall descend from heaven; and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then *we*, the living who remain, shall be caught up together with them in [the] clouds, to meet the Lord in [the] air; and thus we shall be always with [the] Lord" (1 Th. 4:15-17).

For *our* commonwealth has its existence in [the] heavens, from which also we await the Lord Jesus Christ [as] Saviour, who shall transform our body of humiliation into conformity to His body of glory" (Phil. 3:20-21).

*To be cont'd*

## **OUTLINES FOR BIBLE TEACHING (14)**

### **27. THE PASSOVER — Exodus 12:1-28; 13:1-16**

#### *Outline*

1. Institution of the Passover Ex. 12:1-28
2. Command for its Remembrance Ex. 13:1-16 32

#### *Explanation*

1. Details were given for the ceremony of the first Passover. The reason was twofold: (a) preparation for their flight from Egypt (Ex. 12: 11); and (b) to keep the angel of death from killing the firstborn (Ex. 12:22-23).

2. The remembrance of the great event was to be observed as an ordinance forever, and to be explained to the children (Ex. 12:24-28).

#### *Lesson*

Jehovah introduced a new reckoning of time; the former history of Israel was to be forgotten. Thus the life of the believer begins with redemption.

The passover lamb is a type of Christ (1 Cor. 5:7). Just as it was taken on the tenth and kept till the fourteenth day of the first month, so Christ was foreknown of God before the foundation of the world, but only manifested in the last times (Gal. 4:4; 1 Pet. 1:18-20). And as the lamb was exposed to the fire, so Christ was exposed to the holy and righteous judgment of God (Ps. 17:2; 22:1).

Under the protection of the blood, Israel was perfectly safe from divine judgment. Similarly a person will only be safe from God's judgment once he has acknowledged that Christ died for him. Only when God sees the applied blood He will pass over us, the plague (judgment) shall not be upon us. The eating of the lamb is a picture of believingly accepting the Lord as one's personal Saviour and of inward fellowship with Him (Jn. 6:53). Since leaven is always a picture of evil, the unleavened bread is a picture of separation from wickedness and malice (1 Cor. 5:8). The bitter herbs are a reminder how the death of Christ for our sins is bitterly painful to us.

### **28. THE DEPARTURE FROM EGYPT; THE SONG OF DELIVERANCE — Exodus 12:29-42; 13:17 — 15:21**

#### *Outline*

1. The Last Night In Egypt Ex. 12:29-42
2. The Journey to the Red Sea Ex. 13:17 - 14:2
3. The Pursuit by Pharaoh Ex. 14:3-9

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| 4. The Fear of the Israelites     | Ex. 14:10-12 |
| 5. The Passage Through the Sea    | Ex. 14:13-22 |
| 6. The Might of Pharaoh Destroyed | Ex. 14:23-31 |
| 7. The Song of Deliverance        | Ex. 15:1-21  |

#### *Explanation*

1. Because of the death of the firstborn of men and beasts, the Egyptians urged the Israelites to leave, giving them any valuables they asked for.
2. God led them towards the wilderness, the longer route.
3. Pharaoh's hardened heart caused him to pursue the Israelites.
4. Fear came over them when they forgot that God would keep them.
5. God separated the Egyptians from the Israelites by a cloud which provided light for the Israelites but darkness for the Egyptians. The waters of the Red Sea were divided by a strong wind so that the Israelites could cross dryshod.
6. When the Egyptians pursued onto the dry sea bed, God instructed Moses to stretch forth his hand, and the waters returned, drowning the entire army of pursuers, including Pharaoh.
7. Once they realized that their redemption was sure and complete they could not help but sing.

#### *Lesson*

Under the direction and help of God the exodus began as an act of faith (Heb. 11:29; Ps. 114). God did not lead them the short and easy way of the Philistines, rather the way of the wilderness; He knows our frame (Ps. 103: 14).

The pillar of cloud and of fire shows that the Lord never leaves His people. When the people became alarmed through unbelief, God's comfort came: "See the salvation of Jehovah; Jehovah will fight for you." The pillar of cloud went behind the Israelites. The Israelites (today all believers) may "stand still" under all circumstances, for then they will see what the Lord will do (Ex. 14:11-20).

The Red Sea (or "the Reed Sea" — Hebrew has no vowels) is a picture of the redeeming, or saving power of Christ's death for us.

The destruction of the Egyptians speaks of the coming judgment of the world (Ps. 34:7, 16, 21; 2 Th. 1:8-9).

### **29. MARAH AND ELIM; QUAILS AND MANNA — Exodus 15:22 - 16:36 (see Num. 11)**

#### *Outline*

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| 1. The Israelites at Marah | Ex. 15:22-26 |
| 2. The Israelites at Elim  | Ex. 15:27    |
| 3. Quails and Manna        | Ex. 16:1-36  |

#### *Explanation*

1. After three days without finding water, the first oasis they came to had undrinkable water.
2. The second oasis provided an abundance of water and shade.
3. In response to their murmuring, God provided sufficient meat and bread for their sustenance.

## *Lesson*

Israel's songs of praise ceased to sound at Marah; through the bitter water the people were put to the test and they murmured (Ps. 106:13-15). The sweet wood is a picture of the cross of the Lord by which, through faith, the waters of death and all tribulations can be conquered (Heb. 2:14-15). Elim is a picture of the tender care for the believer in the midst of the wilderness (Ps. 23:1-3). New bitterness and dissatisfaction in the wilderness of Sin caused Israel to turn in heart to Egypt and be ungrateful toward God (Rom. 1:21). God's grace was shown in the giving of the quails and MANNA — the bread from heaven. Manna is a type of the spiritual food of the believer (Jn. 6:35, 48, 51, 57, 58).

### **30. WATER FROM THE ROCK; AMALEK; JETHRO — Ex. 17-18 (see Dt. 25:17-19)**

#### *Outline*

1. Water from the Rock    Ex. 17:1-7
2. Jehovah-Nissi        Ex. 17:8-16
3. Jethro's Visit        Ex. 18:1-27

#### *Explanation*

1. The murmurings of the people again brought Moses before the Lord on their behalf.
2. While Joshua and his men fought in the valley, Aaron and Hur held up Moses' hands on the mountain. As long as Moses' hands were held high, Israel prevailed.
3. Jethro brought Zipporah and the two sons back to Moses. He brought sacrifices to God and was allowed to eat with the elders of Israel. He acted as advisor to Moses, who hearkened unto his words.

## *Lesson*

The people showed unbelief and unparalleled wickedness at Rephidim (Ps. 95:7-10; Heb. 3:15-16). Our hearts are like those of the children of Israel; thence the necessity of the new birth and gracious preservation (Jn. 3:3; Heb. 12:15). The smitten rock a picture of Christ; out of His 36 opened side there came forth salvation and life for us (1 Cor, 10-4). Amalek was defeated in answer to Moses' intercession. Moses upon the hill is a type of the Lord as Intercessor with God (Heb. 7:25, 26). Joshua with his sharp sword in the valley is a picture of the Spirit of Jesus who dwells here below in the heart of the believer and uses the Word of God (Gal. 5:16, 17; Heb. 4:12, 13).

*To be cont'd*

## **JUDE (1)**

—H. L. Heijkoop

#### *Introduction*

Although this Epistle is one of the smaller Bible books (only Obadiah, Philemon, First and Second John are smaller), its contents are exceptionally important and of great weight. It is written in the prophet's vigorous and rapid style and contains a wealth of instruction. Its form and purpose become evident to every believing, attentive reader.

In this Epistle we find the history of the apostasy of Christendom. It embraces an extensive period beginning in the days of the apostles, when the first elements of evil had crept into the Assembly, until the day that the Lord with His holy myriads

comes to earth to execute the final judgment over Christianity, when He will establish His millennial kingdom as described in Revelation 19 (cf. Rev. 3:3).

The Epistle was specially written in view of deceivers who had forced their way in with great promises of freedom. They caused souls to give themselves up to sin and licentiousness, denied the Lord's coming, and actually disowned all His claims upon them. Peter's second Epistle and the three Epistles of John had the same general purpose as Jude's. But, although all five Epistles portray the ruin and apostasy in the Assembly, prophetically displaying the end time, there are nevertheless great distinctions between them.

The Second Epistle of Peter especially resembles Jude's. This has caused virtually all scholars to conclude that either Peter knew Jude's Epistle or Jude the Second Epistle of Peter before they wrote their own Epistles. Most go so far as to consider the one to be a free rendering of the other. But such reasoning only demonstrates the spiritual ignorance and presumptuousness to which one comes if one does not accept the verbal — or perhaps more correctly the plenary — inspiration of the Scriptures which is clearly taught in 1 Corinthians 2:13 and other passages.

Both Epistles are not only of great significance but are clearly inspired by God. Each expresses the thoughts of the inspiring Spirit through its own specific subject. One who reads both Epistles in that dependency of faith which alone gives insight will, to his great benefit, see the distinctions divine wisdom has incorporated.

The prominent truth in the Second Epistle of Peter is God's righteous government. In his First Epistle Peter presented that government for the benefit of believers in their daily lives, and its application to the house of God. In the Second, however, he showed God's government over the unrighteous and the guilty in this world, even till the day of the Lord. During that day the present heavens and earth, which are by His word laid up in store, kept for fire unto a day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men, shall be burnt up (2 Pet. 3:7-10). Therefore Peter speaks of righteousness, unrighteousness and sin.

Jude, on the other hand, sees Christians as a religious professing company on earth. Originally they were true to their profession, but now certain ones had crept in who denied their profession by their practices. Jude therefore had to describe the same evil as Peter, but from a much deeper and more serious viewpoint: that of departure and apostasy from God. He sees the evil much more as departure from faith and the will of God than as departure from righteousness. Jude's different vantage point leads to the most obvious distinctions which elude the caviling critics. In sin, shame and foolishness, they rather would blindly raise their fancied discoveries against the Holy Spirit than admire the perfect Word in the coherence of its necessary distinctions.

These persons, who have slipped in, although morally apostate (for they deny the only Master and Lord Jesus Christ and are ungodly, turning the grace of our God into licentiousness) are not yet openly so; they are still among the believers. Even at the time of judgment (v. 15) they are still designated as: "the ungodly *of them*," although the true believers will have been taken to heaven by then. In the First Epistle of John we see a more advanced, an open falling away. "They went out from among us" (1 Jn. 2:19). That is the beginning of the apostasy of which 2 Thessalonians 2 speaks, which will take place only after the rapture.

Jude looks at grace. Nothing equals grace! But what if grace is rejected? What if it is changed into lasciviousness? This is the question Jude deals with. Consequently this Epistle is one of the more serious books of the Bible. There is only one book that is more serious: the First Epistle of John. John deals not just with departure from grace, but with the denial of Christ, of the Father and the Son. Certainly, the Bible knows no greater evil than the denial of the glory of Him in whose name we have been baptized, and of whom we have confessed that through Him we have received every blessing that God could give! Nothing is more deadly, nothing more terrible than the condition of someone who rejects the Lord, denying that He is the Christ and the Son of God. Writing on that subject was the task of him who loved the Lord most devotedly, of John.

We see in these three Epistles (2 Pet, 1 Jn., and Jude) three levels of corruption in Christendom of which Jude describes the middle one and 1 John the worst. As to its contents, Jude ought to precede 1 John. We should realize, that, although their contents is inspired, the adopted sequence of the Bible books is not. Indeed, in some editions of the Bible we find a different sequence. In this regard we are not worse off than the earliest believers. In most cases they had a poorer sequence, for the general Epistles preceded those of Paul. We might have expected that those who lived right after the apostles had more insight than we, but that is not so. Only the Holy Spirit can give insight and wisdom, and to receive it, we must be completely dependent upon Him. The Lord said, "When He is come, the Spirit of truth, He will guide you into all the truth" (Jn. 16:13). Since we too have the Holy Spirit, we are not in a position inferior to theirs to judge the question of Bible book sequence.

Reading the Epistle of Jude we can't help noticing that many trios are used besides a few pairs. In verse 1 three characteristics of believers are given. Verse 2 presents three wishes. Verse 4 mentions three characteristics of the people who had crept in. Verses 5 to 7 give three examples of judgment. In verse 8 we see three things the dreamers do and so in verse 11. In verse 16 we find three things they do, of which the first one mentioned is in itself a trio. Verses 22 and 23 describe three things to be done by believers. Perhaps we could include verses 17 to 19. Finally, we read in the latter part of verse 25: "Before the whole age, and now, and to all the ages." The paired expressions we may, for instance, see in verses 9, 10, 15 (2 times), 24. Don't these trios and pairs speak of a perfect testimony? "In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every matter be established" (2 Co. 13:1).

God thought it well to inform us that the first elements of ruin and apostasy entered the Assembly in the days of the apostles. Paul, Peter, John and Jude, all four write about it. But more than that, in verses 14 and 15 of our Epistle God refers to the first known prophetic announcement (uttered more than 2500 years before God called forth the church at Pentecost); it already foretold that the Assembly would leave her God-given place and that it would, therefore, come under God's judgment. The evil had come in and would continue till the end, until it was completely ripe for judgment. The apostle John had to pronounce God's judgment to the best assembly, the one that had possessed that highest standing, and that God's Word displays as the model assembly. To that assembly, where according to secular history John lived and worked for years, he had to write: "But I have against thee, that thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works: but if not, I am coming to thee, and will remove thy lamp out of its place, except thou shalt repent" (Rev. 2:4-5). When the apostle Paul bade farewell to the elders of this same assembly, he had to say: "I know [this,] that there will come in amongst you after my departure grievous wolves, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves shall rise up men speaking perverted things to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30).

We live in the time of which Paul, Peter, John and Jude spoke. There are no successors, men endowed with apostolic authority. But we have what the Ephesians had after Paul's departure: "And now I commit you to God, and to the Word of His grace, which is able to build [you] up and give [to you] an inheritance among all the sanctified" (Acts 20:32). I don't think there ever was a time when men rejoiced so much in "the Word of God's grace" as during the last century and a half. This may be so, but the question is: Do I, do you rejoice in it? If we look at the great decline and the far-reaching ruin in the Assembly, should we not be anxious that God's rights are being maintained?

Why would God have given us this information? Not so we would become discouraged seeing the ruin around us. But so we would be ever more convinced of man's inability to safeguard anything God has entrusted to him. This would cause us to feel more and more the need for complete dependence upon the Lord. He wants us to seek wisdom from Him how to conduct ourselves under such circumstances. No, God does not ask us to restore the Assembly in the glory which it had in the beginning. If that were our desire, we would only show our lack of fellowship with God and His sentiments. If the first condition has not been kept, God will be very patient, but there is no restoration. When God comes in judgment, He always goes back to the first departure from the position that He had established. When Stephen spoke of Israel's departure and sin, he went back to the golden calf, there was the first departure (Acts 7). We too must go back to the beginning to be able to judge the present situation.

We have to walk deeply conscious of the irreparable ruin in the Assembly. In this frame of mind we must walk according to the directions God's Word gives us for the present time. We are never at liberty to give up something received from God. The present ruin is no excuse for carelessness towards any expression of His will; it rather calls for greater alertness, for more prayer. Above all, it fosters within us a sense of need for God and the Word of His grace, for these problems all surpass the power and wisdom of man. But are they beyond the Spirit of God? And then, we may know that He is above all, He will complete His work in perfection. Even in a time of declension a Christian can glorify God just as much as in the blessed, early days of the Assembly. May the Lord work that He can say of each of us: "Thou... hast kept My Word, and hast not denied My name" (Rev. 3:8).

*To be cont'd*

## **THE MINOR PROPHETS (1)**

—R. Been Sr.

### *General Remarks on Prophecy*

It seems profitable to make a few general remarks before we undertake to study the twelve so-called minor prophets of the Old Testament.



### *The dual purpose of prophecy*

Old Testament prophecy can be viewed in two ways:

1. As mainly addressing Israel, *the nation that God still considers as His people*,
2. As dealing with that same nation, *which is so guilty that God can no longer consider it to be His people*.

In the first case the prophecy has as purpose to *reach the conscience of the nation*, so that it may return to the right path before God. We could mention the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah as examples of this. In them we see how God still occupies Himself with the two tribes, Judah, the nation owned by Him. In those days we see how the nations attack Judah, but each time the nation is saved by God.

In the second case the prophets show how, in the distant future, the remnant out of the nation will return to God in repentance and humiliation. Of this the prophecy of Daniel is an example. It presents God's almighty government over the nations. In it Israel takes a background position; no longer is it saved but oppressed and going into exile.

### *The moral purpose of prophecy*

First of all, it presents future things, but it also speaks of the evil of those in whose midst the prophecy is proclaimed. Then it also points to the means that God will use to save His people and to safeguard it against the judgment. It is as in the days of Noah, who, through divine direction, prepared an ark, thereby condemning the then present world and announcing the flood in a prophetic way. Man's evil had reached its peak, but at the same time salvation through means of the ark was preached.

When judgment comes, *it is always announced beforehand*. The judgment over this world, of which Scripture speaks extensively, has already been announced. The execution comes only after the pinnacle of God's longsuffering has been reached. By times, therefore, prophecy is a serious appeal for repentance, as it was in the case of the city of Nineveh. Prophecy itself is therefore not the judgment, it only announces it, and that in itself is grace.

Often prophecy announces judgment over the nation Israel that, through the faithfulness and piety of many kings, *was in a rather favourable condition*. As long as God continues to concern Himself directly with the nation, He takes careful note of all moral evil found among them. He evaluates all in the light of the blessings and privileges that He bestowed upon them in the beginning of their existence as a nation. In this light their actual condition is compared to what was from the beginning. As a result it can happen that Jehovah observes that: "From the sole of the foot even unto the head... wounds, and weals, and open sores: they have not been dressed, nor bound up," although the people tread the courts of the Lord (Isa. 1:6). The same principle applies in the present day for the Assembly, the Church. The Lord says to the assembly in Ephesus, which was outwardly in a good condition: "Remember therefore whence thou art fallen" (Rev. 2:5). And to the one in Sardis He says: "Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard" (Rev. 3:3).

Man's conscience can never have a sober and true judgment about his present condition (or that of the Assembly) if he judges it according to present day circumstances rather than in light of received blessings and privileges. *We must learn to judge as God judges*.

It hardly needs mentioning that prophecy *presupposes knowledge of God* with those to whom it is addressed, superficial as such knowledge may be. This knowledge was the basis for the relationship between God and the Jewish nation.

### *Prophecy and remnant*

Once the condition of the nation has become irreparable, prophecy becomes for those who — in the midst of the general unfaithfulness, apostasy, and ruin — have remained faithful, a precious encouragement. The remnant experienced this in the past, and it will do so once more in the future. For these faithful ones prophecy contains a testimony that God will remain for them the Same, despite all, and He will fulfill to the remnant His promises that He has given to His people. These promises always centre in Christ, in Him they are "yea and amen." The promises can be fulfilled without detracting from God's holiness, righteousness and glory because of Christ and His work. Even the judgment of this world will be to God's glory.

God could not always maintain His connection with an irreparably sinful Israel; as a whole, He had to give them up into judgment. But, since His gifts and His calling are not subject to repentance, He will receive the remnant of them again as His people. He will do this, however, on an entirely new basis, and that basis is Christ and His work. This remnant will be the core of future Israel. It will be a holy and born-again nation connected with the one-rejected Messiah, to whom all God's promises will be fulfilled. After passing through the judgments of the Great Tribulation whereby it will be purified, this remnant out of the two and the ten tribes will inherit the blessings of Christ's kingdom.

Directing itself to the *unfaithful nation*, prophecy announces only coming wrath. It is, however, God's purpose to bring many of the nation back to Himself, and to the very last the door will remain open for all who repent.

But when prophecy is directed to *the faithful remnant* it speaks of the means God will employ to bring about the redemption of this remnant; these means all centre in the revelation of the Messiah. No wonder that prophecy is so precious to the remnant.

### *Objects of prophecy*

As a general rule prophecy speaks to *Israel*. By exception it speaks *directly to the Gentiles*; it does so for instance in Daniel, Obadiah and Nahum.

When men stood up against God and made a *central gathering point* by building the tower of Babel, God judged them and scattered them over the earth (Dt. 32:8-9). He then set the boundaries of the nations in view of the number of Israelites, making *Israel the central nation*. The nations have never acknowledged Israel as such, but they never succeeded to take "the navel of the earth" out of Israel's hands as long as God regarded them as His people. But when Israel's condition deteriorated to the point that God had to give them up, He gave the central power to the nations (Dan. 2:37; 5:18).

### *Christ and prophecy*

In most instances, the prophets mentioned under which kings they prophesied. On the one hand the nation, on the other hand the king to whom the Lord had entrusted the guidance of His people, was held responsible by God. It had been this way even from the days of Saul, but more particularly so when the Lord gave a king after His own heart, who reigned in grace and power (as David) or in peace and glory (as Solomon). Both, as well as all the other kings after them, did not entirely quit themselves of this responsibility. With Christ this is different, He will not only accept the responsibility for the kingdom, but He will also *meet all requirements*. Prophecy says of Him: "There will I cause the horn of David to bud forth; I have ordained a lamp for Mine Anointed. His enemies will I clothe with shame; but upon Himself shall His crown flourish" (Ps. 132:17-18). God will be completely glorified by Him after the nation and its kings have failed.

*It is therefore Christ who gives prophecy its value and meaning.* If prophecy would have to have its fulfillment through the actions of sinful people, its value would be relatively little. Then history would repeat itself, the responsibility of nation and king would regularly make place for chastisement and judgment. During the reign of Christ, however, there is no prophecy, for all (both men and things) will be well.

### *The four major prophets*

In the prophecy of Isaiah, the Assyrian, the great enemy, assails Judah; it is, however, unable to subdue it. That is how things were then, and so they will be in the future, when the prophetic Assyrian, the King of the North, will attack Judah. But Isaiah speaks also a great deal about the approaching Babylonian exile.

Although God had not yet uttered His "Lo-Ammi" (not My-people), Jeremiah's prophecy ends with the exile to Babel.

Ezekiel describes how Jehovah departed from the temple and from Jerusalem. God's glory left both places. Yet, there will be restoration.

Daniel shows Israel (Judah) given up by God to the power of the Gentiles, the world powers. These powers are judged according to their faithfulness in executing the government entrusted to them, rather than by the rules God's government gave to Israel.

### *Prophetic overview*

At the end of the seventy years of exile, a small number of Jews returned to the land by permission of king Cyrus. They no longer had a king but governors, for they remained under the power of the Gentiles. The temple and the wall of Jerusalem were rebuilt.

The ages passed. Finally the forerunner of the Messiah appeared, the greatest among the prophets, John the Baptist. He was immediately followed by the Messiah, who was rejected by the leaders and the people. This event led to the termination of the history of the Jewish nation. Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jews either killed or dispersed, until the people will say: "Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord."

While the Lord Jesus reached out to a nation not desiring Him, only a small remnant, beginning with the twelve apostles, followed Him. Out of this remnant the Assembly, the Church, was formed after the Lord's resurrection and ascension by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Assembly will be taken up into heaven at the coming of the Lord in the air. After this, there will be a rapid fulfillment of prophetic events culminating in the introduction of the thousand-year kingdom of Christ. But before this kingdom comes, two of Israel's tribes will return to Palestine, the Roman Empire will be revived, the Antichrist will exert himself, and the prophetic Assyrian, the King of the North, will attack the land. Just before the Millennium, two-thirds of the Jews will be exterminated, the Roman Empire will be destroyed, the King of the North will be judged, and, finally, Satan will be bound in the bottomless pit.

The prophets don't speak of the period (already some 1900 years) following the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jews among the nations of this world. None of the prophecies concern the time of the Assembly, the Church. It seems as if the thread of history is broken, but after the Church is taken up, God takes up this thread and Israel and the nations become once more prominent.

*To be cont'd*