

## NOTING DISPENSATIONAL CHANGES.

– ACTS 11:4-15. – APRIL 27. –

**"Whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins."**

– Acts 10:43.

THE NEWS of Peter's visit to Cornelius and the baptism of the latter, a Gentile, into the Christian Church, created quite a hubbub – not in Jerusalem only, but throughout Judea. Peter may have been called to Jerusalem by the brethren to give some explanation of such an innovation; – or, learning of the commotion, he may have gone voluntarily to explain the situation and to set the minds of the brethren at rest respecting the propriety of his course. He took with him the six of the Joppa brethren who had accompanied him to the house of Cornelius. This was a wise course; Peter recognized that however well satisfied he himself might be respecting the propriety of what he had done, it was but just to the brethren to give as explicit a testimony on the subject as possible – to avoid the least ground for criticism or division of sentiment in the Church.

We note the divine providence which guided in this matter – that (1) it was Peter, the eldest, and in some respects the strongest of the apostles who was chosen for this service; and (2) that he was guided in judgment in respect to taking with him six of the prominent Joppa brethren. Thus does the Lord supervise the affairs of his people, while yet leaving the matter without a special direct revelation – teaching them rather by their experiences and his providential leadings. He could have sent an angel to the apostles, at the appointed time, to inform them definitely that the "seventy weeks" of Israel's favor had expired; and that now, in harmony with the divine plan, the gospel was to be preached not to Jews only, but to people of any or every nation who might be found with "ears to hear" – with hearts to appreciate it. But to have made such a revelation would have had three disadvantages; (1) the Church would thus be caused to walk by sight

rather than by faith; (2) a precedent would have been established under which at any future time the Lord's people would have been warranted in expecting miraculous instruction, and thus their minds would have been diverted from the Scriptures which God intended should be the light upon our pathway; (3) miraculous instruction is opposed to thought, reflection and examination of underlying principles – so important to the progress of the Lord's people in grace and in knowledge.

We should not be surprised that the apostles [R2996 : page 121] would be opposed to Peter's going to the Gentiles with the gospel message; such a course was contrary to all the traditions of their nation for over sixteen centuries – seemingly in contradiction of many of the statements of the prophets: prudence, therefore, bade them beware lest the new light and blessing which they had received should mislead them into too great liberty – into license contrary to the Lord's Word. They probably called to mind that the promises indicated that God's blessings were to come to the world through Israel – "the forces of the Gentiles should come unto thee" – the "sons of strangers shall build up thy walls" – "the nation and kingdom that will not serve thee, shall perish," etc. They may also have recalled our Lord's words at the beginning of his ministry when sending forth the apostles, and subsequently, the "seventy," he said, "Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not; for I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." – Matt. 15:24.

In view of these things the apostles and brethren did only their duty in calling Peter to account – in seeing to it that they took no liberty with the Lord's directions – that they did not attempt to get beyond, or to circumvent his arrangements. They did realize that a change of dispensation was upon them, and that in some important sense Israel was rejected by the Lord, so that only the remnant accepting Christ were now in divine favor; but they did not realize fully what this meant, nor see clearly how the Lord's promises centering in Israel were yet to be fulfilled. We can see now, in the light of providential leadings and

apostolic teachings, and in the light of prophetic fulfilment, what it was not possible for them to see clearly at that time.

We can see that natural Israel was being rejected, – blinded with a blindness which would last for nearly nineteen centuries. We can see God's purpose to elect, in the interim, the spiritual seed of Abraham; taking, firstly, from the natural Israelites all found worthy; and secondly, completing the election with chosen ones selected from among the Gentiles – possessing the spirit of Abraham, the spirit of faith and obedience. We can see, that this Spiritual Israel was not fully explained through the promises and through the prophets; but that the elect church in the prophecies was counted in the Messianic promises – as members of the body of Messiah of which Jesus is the Head, "God blessed forever." (Rom. 9:5.) We can see, that not until this body of Messiah shall be complete will the Lord's promises to natural Israel have fulfilment; – then their blindness being turned away (Rom. 11:26-32), they will become the leading nation of earth, representative of the spiritual Kingdom of God, the glorified Church, the Messianic body: then the forces of the Gentiles will come to them, and all earthly interests will co-operate, and a blessing through Israel shall proceed to all the families of the earth.

### **THE CHARGES AGAINST PETER.**

It is rather peculiar, that the charges made against Peter were not that he had recognized Cornelius as a Christian and baptized him and his household, but that he had gone into their house and had eaten bread with them – proceedings which were contrary to Jewish custom entirely – the recognition of the Gentiles as being on an equality with the Jews – a matter which had been settled to the contrary with them, from time immemorial. Singularly, too, the Apostle Peter in his defense entirely ignored their charges and proceeded to acquit himself as though they had charged him in the way we would have expected – with receiving a Gentile into Christian brotherhood. Yet Peter's course was just the proper one, and, undoubtedly, he was guided thereto. There

is a lesson in this for the Lord's people to the effect that it is always better to discuss fundamental principles and divine laws than to dispute over traditions of men and mere technical observances, customs, etc. When Peter got the fundamental features straight before the minds of all, the question of social customs was settled; whereas, if he had discussed the proprieties of the social custom, the larger question would still have been unsettled.

Peter's simple, humble, unvarnished explanation was a rehearsal of the facts in the case. He considered that the evidence which had convinced him that he was right, would similarly convince the others; and he was correct in this. He might on the contrary have "stood on his dignity" and have insisted that what he did was none of the business of the others – that he was an apostle and the eldest of them, and specially guided of the Lord; and that the Lord had even declared in advance that he should have and use the keys of the Kingdom; and that as he had used the first of these in announcing the divine favor on the day of Pentecost, so now he had used the other in opening the door of favor to the Gentiles. Such a course while it would have had a great deal of truth in it, would have been an unwise one to say the least; – the humbler, kinder, more brotherly course he did take speaks well to us of his heart condition, his humility, his love to the brethren, his desire to make matters so simple, so clear, so explicit, that none could have any occasion for stumbling over his action. Had he been arrogantly disposed, a great breach in the church might have resulted; – but no; the Lord was at the helm, and had Peter been out of proper condition of heart would not have used him, but some humbler brother for this service. There is a good lesson in this for us all – especially for such as are chosen leaders of the various little companies of the Lord's people: the lesson is, humility, brotherly kindness, love. Any appearance of haughtiness, anything dictatorial in manner or tone would be unbecoming in any of the Lord's people, but especially so in any seeking to serve him: leaders manifesting a haughty spirit should be considered, in that respect and degree, unsuited to the position they fill,

– while those who manifest the humbler manner and spirit of Peter on this occasion, should be proportionately the more esteemed by all.

Peter rehearsed his experiences, the Lord's leadings, going into the smallest details, so that the brethren might have the benefit of the situation as fully as though they had been in his stead; and to their credit, the record says, that, when they had heard the particulars, so far from further murmuring against Peter or finding fault with his course, they [R2996 : page 122] glorified God. This shows us clearly that their opposition to the extension of the gospel favor was not the result of any narrowness or meanness of heart; but was the result of conscientious conviction respecting the divine program. They were gradually learning the lesson that a new dispensation was being ushered in, by divine providence, and their entire anxiety was that they might run no faster than the Lord's spirit, through his Word and providences, would direct them – glad, however, to note the leadings and to receive the lessons and to act accordingly.

Similarly, we today are living in a time of changing dispensations; similarly, the Lord's providence is now guiding his people to a clearer appreciation of his plan – to a discernment of certain changes of dispensation now in progress: First, that as in the end of the Jewish age the nominal systems of fleshly Israel were rejected of the Lord, and ignored, so now the nominal systems of spiritual Israel are rejected of the Lord, and all "Israelites indeed" are being gathered out of them. Second, as it was a difficult matter for the Jews to realize that divine favor would extend beyond their nation to the Gentiles, so now it is a difficult matter for Christian people to comprehend that divine favor does not end with the election of the Christian Church; but that, on the contrary, the blessing of all the families of the earth must there begin; and that the new dispensation, the Millennium, in which this favor to the world is to be bestowed by the Church, is nigh, even at the door. As Peter was patient in his explanation of the Lord's providence and leadings in respect to the greater lengths and breadths of divine favor, so now it behooves all of the Lord's people to be very patient, very

gentle, and as wise as serpents in presenting to their fellow Christians, true Israelites, the evidence which the Lord's providence has furnished to us, in respect to the world-wide blessings and their nearness. Our Lord's words are applicable, "Be ye wise as serpents, harmless as doves." – Matt. 10:16.

Peter explained to his hearers the simple gospel message which he had presented to the Gentiles, and which they had so gladly received; that it was in no sense a perversion of the message preached to the Jews, and in no degree were any of the gospel's conditions modified to win Gentile approval; it was the same gospel that had blessed them which now refreshed and blessed the Gentiles. He told them of his surprise when the Lord manifested his favor toward the Gentiles by bestowing some of the gifts of the holy spirit upon them – similar to those bestowed upon the Jewish believers at Pentecost, and subsequently transmitted through the apostles. He declares that this manifestation of divine favor called to his mind the words of the Lord, "John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the holy spirit." (Acts 1:5.) By this he understood clearly that the holy spirit baptism was of much greater importance than water baptism; and he understood, further, that only the "*you*" class would be baptized with the holy spirit; and hence he could not logically ignore the fact that the Gentiles having received the same spirit must be in the Lord's estimation reckoned as members of the same body of Christ, and eligible to baptism, etc. He concluded his argument with a question which must have appealed to all of his hearers; "Who was I that I should withstand God?"

The whole company agreed, that Peter would have had no right to withstand the will of the Lord; but that every propriety called upon him to conform his teachings and his conduct to the Lord's arrangements; and so under this wise presentation the entire company came into full harmony of heart and mind, on an important subject which, had it not been **[R2997 : page 122]** properly handled, might have meant rending and discord in the early Church, and have made two or more factions

of those who were at heart desirous of being right and in accord with the Lord's will. Let us each and all resolve to follow Peter's example in every such matter, and thus to study the welfare, the best interest, the peace, of Zion.

The decision of the conference was, that the evidence educed by Peter was unquestionable, that a new step in the divine plan had been taken, and that henceforth God had granted to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews the privilege of "repentance unto life." Very properly none of them thought of calling into question God's right, God's privilege in this matter of granting repentance unto life. These faithful brethren were not disposed to run into either of two extremes common to some today – they neither claimed that God was bound to give his favors only to Israel, nor on the other hand did they claim that he was bound to make a free offer of repentance unto life to everybody alike. Some today go to even a greater extreme than this, claiming not only an opportunity for repentance unto life to all, but that God must eventually and everlastingly save all – grant all everlasting life. Let all the Lord's people beware that they do not attempt to dictate to the Almighty; that they recognize him as a sovereign, and seek to know his will, and not to dictate according to their wills.

The brethren evidently drew the lesson which the Lord wished them to draw; namely, that God was thenceforth willing to grant forgiveness of sins to Gentiles as well as Jews who would repent and seek to be in harmony with him. There is no suggestion in this of coercion nor of acceptance upon any other condition than repentance and pardon of sins; and this implies faith in the Lord Jesus and in his work as the ransom for sinners, and turning to God with full sincerity of heart, to know and, as far as possible, to do those things which would please him. This is still the position of the Lord's people and must be to the end of the age; it is the established principle underlying all of the Lord's dealings and promises.

Our Golden Text is in full accord with this. The remission of sins, typically, year by year, was Israel's favor only, for centuries; and when the real sacrifice for sin had been offered, the privilege of repentance unto remission of sins, tho confined for a time (three and a half years) to the Jews was thereafter thrown open to all alike – "He that hath an *ear* let him hear" the message. There is no other means of approach to God than through the remission, the covering of our sins; and there is no other means of covering than through faith in the precious blood of Christ. "No man cometh unto the Father but by me." "There is none other name under heaven given among men whereby [R2997 : page 123] we must be saved." All suggestions therefore of salvation without a belief in Jesus, – all suggestions of salvation of the heathen in ignorance, all suggestions of their being no necessity for a knowledge of the historic Christ, – all suggestions that a recognition of the Christ spirit of righteousness is sufficient, – all suggestions of harmony with God through any other than the one, appointed, "Mediator of the New Covenant," – receive a thorough condemnation in the words of this text. The entire plan of God sets forth and honors not only divine justice, wisdom, love, and power, but it likewise sets forth and honors the Lord Jesus as the only way by which, access may be had to the Father, and by which everlasting life may be attained by any. In view of these limitations, how comforting are the assurances of the Scriptures, that for the vast majority of our race the time of knowledge and, hence, the time of probation for everlasting life is future; during the Millennium. In that, their "due time," all the deaf ears shall be unstopped and all shall hear the voice of the Son of Man (and his Bride, glorified) directing in the right ways of the Lord; – "and they that hear [obey] shall live." – It is a further cause of joy that this blessing and opportunity for resurrection to perfection, under the judgments of such gracious judges, is to extend also to "all that are in their graves." – John 5:25,28; I Tim. 2:6.

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