

Sunday, February 5, 2012—Grace Life School of the Bible—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 56 Darby's Dispensational System: The Current Dispensation, Part 2

### The Mystery and the Rapture

- Despite some of the problems with the particulars of JND's dispensational scheme he did clearly recognize that the church was not the subject of prophecy but a mystery kept secret since the world began.
  - **"I distinguish entirely between the church and prophecy. I do not believe the church is the subject**, though it is the recipient and depositary of prophecy, as Abraham was of what should happen to Lot." (*Letters*, 1:131)
- The church as one body in Christ, composed of Jews and Gentiles, was not spoken of in the O.T. (*Collected Writings*, 10:15, 83, 244) "The Scripture meaning of mystery is that known only by revelation, not by human knowledge." (*Collected Writings* 9:248) The mystery formed no part of the O.T. prophecy or promise. (*Collected Writings*, 10:248)
  - **"We have the largest and fullest warrant for saying, that it was entirely unrevealed in the Old Testament. Speaking of the mystery, the admission of the Gentiles to be of the one body in the assembly of God, Paul says (Rom. 16: 25, 26), "The preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest and by prophetic scriptures [not "the scriptures of the prophets"], according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith," etc. In Ephesians 3: 4, 5, "The mystery of Christ, which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs and of the same body"; and (v. 9), "the fellowship of the mystery which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God: to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus." So in Colossians 1: 24, "for his body's sake, the church, whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God, which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God; the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints." This doctrine, of which Paul, as he states in the Colossians, was a minister, as well as of the gospel, in order to complete the word of God, was thus wholly unknown to the saints of the Old Testament. Much more was utterly obscure; but this was hid in God. Other things they might have were for an age to come, not for themselves, as the promise of the Spirit and the Messiah's glory and redemption; but this they knew not at all. When the Father had revealed to Simon Bar-jonas the truth of the Person of Christ, that He was the Son of the living God (not merely the Christ), Christ could then speak of the church; for it was to be founded on that. But He spoke of it only prophetically, and as a future thing - "on this rock I will build my church." It was by resurrection He was declared Son of God with power; so that Satan's power was of no avail; and His death was needed to gather together in one the children of God, wherever scattered abroad - His departure, that the Comforter might come.**

- Except the corn of wheat fell into the ground and died, it abode alone. When Christ had died - had gone up on high - the great foundation was laid for all blessings, and in particular for the church. **And the Holy Ghost, the Comforter, came down according to promise; and the assembly, the church, was formed; and the Lord added daily to the church such as should be saved (the residue); Acts 2: 47. That was the way He now disposed of them, though His promises to Israel remained sure. The doctrine of the church, however, was not taught as far as Scripture informs us. The Christians remained strictly attached to Judaism, zealous of the law; priests were obedient to the faith, nor seem to have ceased to be priests.** Peter never even teaches that Jesus is the Son of God; his doctrine is, "Him whom ye have crucified, God hath exalted to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and remission of sins": God had made Him both Lord and Christ.
- **What will, perhaps, surprise the reader, the church is never named in the epistles but by Paul. A particular assembly is named by John; but the assembly or church as a whole, the body of Christ, is spoken of by Paul only; nor, consequently, I may add, the rapture of the saints before the appearing of Christ. God raised up, we learn in the Acts, a free ministry outside the college of the apostles. This brought out the fullest hatred of the Jews; and Stephen, an eminent instrument of God in this ministry, is put to death. Heaven receives its first-fruits of the power of the Holy Ghost, of the church; heaven itself is opened, and a heavenly Christ is seen - a man in glory is seen. Conformed to Christ, the spirit of Stephen joins Him on high, and the final tale of Judaism was told in blood: they always resisted the Holy Ghost. God did not dwell in a house made by hands. This changed everything; a heavenly gathering before Christ's return was actually begun.**
- This, however, was individual; but the enmity of the Jew was to assume a yet more active and violent character. Not content with making havoc of the church at Jerusalem, Saul must persecute them to strange cities; but while occupied with this, and close to Damascus for the purpose, he is arrested by the Lord's revealing Himself in glory to him, and telling him that those he was persecuting were Himself - "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest; why persecutest thou me?" **Here, then, sovereign grace abounded over final resistance to the Holy Ghost Himself. The foundation for the gospel of the glory was laid, and the identification of all the saints on earth with their glorified Head in heaven was made the starting-point for Paul's testimony as to what His church was. Of this he became minister. For a heavenly, glorious Christ, Jew or Gentile were all one; they were all one in Him. . .**
- **Another character as to the formal existence of the church on earth is, that we, Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2), are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit. The manner of its building is the breaking down the middle wall of partition, and to make of twain one new man; or, as is expressed in a passage already quoted, the mystery is, that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs and of one body.** The baptism of the Holy Ghost, by which it was formed, took place on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1: 8), which it was the distinctive title of Christ to confer (John 1: 33, 34), and which for the saints He ascended up on high to receive. Acts 2: 33; compare John 16: 7.
- In a word, the church, or assembly, is the body of Christ, formed, when the Head was exalted, by the Holy Ghost, which He then sent down to gather together the saints into unity. Before Israel's being owned as a nation, the saints walked in individual faith; when Israel was owned, they were individual members of a nation owned as such as God's

people, but of which the vast mass were unconverted, the unity of which, such as it was, was in the flesh - a unity with which the Spirit had nothing to do, and which, consequently excluded Gentiles. After the death and exaltation of Christ, who gave Himself, not for that nation only, but to gather together in one the children of God which were scattered abroad, all was changed in this respect; **the distinction of Jew and Gentiles effaced; both alike (through faith) reconciled to God, and gathered into the unity of one assembly by the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven, which assembly is the church, i.e., the assembly of God, the body of Christ, the dwelling-place of the Holy Ghost on earth.** We are not enquiring here how far it could be corrupted or ruined, viewed as the house of God, or dwelling-place of the Holy Ghost on earth; but what it is in the primitive scriptural view of it. Nothing is that but itself.

- **This assembly is, as may be seen (Eph. 5), the bride of Christ.** The word is applied to the particular assemblies of Christians in different places, because they formed the assembly of God in that place; but, if the word be taken as Scripture uses it, it is not possible to attach any equivocal sense to it. It is God's assembly, formed by the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven, when the Head had been exalted as Man on high. It is His body and His bride. Translate the Greek word by the natural English one, and no one would have a moment's hesitation as to what it meant - the assembly, or the assembly of God. The Lord added daily to the assembly. He set some in the assembly; firstly, apostles; secondly, prophets.
- **It is called to participate in the sufferings of Christ, and He will present it to Himself as His bride, as Eve to Adam, a glorious church, without spot or wrinkle, or any such thing. When the Lord added to the assembly such as should be saved, it is quite clear that it was not to that to which they belonged already; and their adding to it, an act which shewed they did not belong to it as members of the Jewish nation, not even if they were previously pious. It was a newly instituted body, formed in unity by the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven, and united to the Head, Christ, who was there.**
- We have now to enquire what the testimony of God is as to its joining Him there. **The church's joining Christ has nothing to do with Christ's appearing or coming to earth. Her place is elsewhere. She sits in Him already in heavenly places.** She has to be brought there as to bodily presence. Christ could not remain with His disciples here, and tells them, "I go to prepare a place for you; and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am there ye may be also." The thing she has to expect for herself, then, is not, though sure of that also, Christ's appearing, but her being taken up where He is. And so the apostle, speaking of it in detail, "The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we ever be with the Lord."
- **We go up to meet Christ in the air. Nothing clearer, then, than that we are to go up to meet Him, and not await His coming to earth; but that this coming to receive us to Himself is not His appearing is still clearer, if we pay attention to Colossians 3, which shews that we are already with Him when He shall appear.** "When Christ who is our life shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory." **This identification of the church's hope and glory with Christ Himself is of the essence of the church's blessing. He is our life, our righteousness; the glory given to Him He has given us:**

**we are members of His body, we are of His flesh and of His bones. We reign with Him, suffer with Him, are glorified together, being like Him - conformed to His image. He is hid in God: our life is hid with Him in glory; but for this we must be caught up to meet Him, and that before He appears at all when He does, we are already with Him and appear with Him. This does not state the epoch of the rapture of the church, but, what is far more important, it does clearly shew the entire difference of relationship of the heavenly saints with Christ, and of those who only see Him when He appears. The one are blessed under His reign, and are connected with the earth; the others are identified with Himself - with Him who reigns - appear and reign with Him. Wherever this is enfeebled, Satan is at work.**

- There are truths common to all, such as being manifested before the judgment-seat of Christ. There are those which are the prerogative of faith; and such is our association with Christ, the Firstborn among many brethren, the being His bride and His body. He who awaits Christ's appearing, as the time in which he is to go to be with Him, has denied the proper hope and proper relationship of the church with Christ. On this point there can be no compromise. Ignorance of privilege is one thing (it is our lot, all of us, in one shape or other), the denial of it another. When once we have seen that we are to appear with Christ, and that, consequently, our hope of Christ's coming for us is not properly His appearing, all our habits of thought and our spiritual affections are changed. Our proper hope is not even the glory in which we appear with Him, wonderful as that is, but this, "I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am there ye may be also." "So shall we ever be with the Lord." . . .
- **Such is the general doctrine of the rapture of the church - a doctrine of the last importance; because it is immediately connected with the relationship of the church to Christ, its entire separation from the world and its portion. It is the act which crowns its perfect justification. This rapture before the appearing of Christ is a matter of express revelation, as we have seen from Colossians 3: 4.**
- **As to the time of this rapture, no one, of course, knows it. But the difference, in this respect, between it and the appearing is very marked, in what is most important. At the appearing comes the judgment of this world: hence it connects itself with, and closes, its history; and before it that history must have run on to its revealed result, revealed events must have occurred, and the objects of judgment must have appeared on the scene and accomplished what is predicted of them. The church is associated with Christ already gone, is not of the world as He was not, is risen with Him, has its life hid with Him in God. There is no earthly event between it and heaven It must have been gathered, and Christ rise up from the Father's throne to receive it: that is all. It is this conviction that the church is properly heavenly, in its calling and relationship with Christ, forming no part of the course of events of the earth, which makes its rapture so simple and clear; and on the other hand, it shews how the denial of its rapture brings down the church to an earthly position, and destroys its whole spiritual character and position. Our calling is on high. Events are on earth. Prophecy does not relate to heaven The Christian's hope is not a prophetic subject at all. It is the promise that Christ will come and receive him to Himself that where He is the Christian may be also.**
- Although the question be already answered in principle, it may be well to put it formally here, When is the Christian to expect the Lord? I answer, Always. It is his

**right spiritual character.** His always doing it is that by which his right spiritual state is characterised. Be ye "as men that wait for their Lord when he shall return from the wedding, that they may open to him immediately. Blessed are those servants whom the Lord, when he cometh, shall find watching. Verily I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them . . . Be ye therefore ready also, for at such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh." And, after speaking of service to the saints, the Lord adds, "Blessed is that servant whom his Lord when he cometh, shall find so doing. Of a truth, I say unto you, He will make him ruler over all that he hath. But and if that servant say in his heart, My Lord delayeth his coming and begin to beat the men-servants and the maid-servants he will appoint him his portion with the unbelievers." **Here, as a general principle, the constant waiting for the Lord as a present thing is given as characterising those who are blessed when the Lord comes, and who reign over all things. That which leads the wicked servant into all mischief is, not the denial of the Lord's coming, but the loss of the sense and present expectation of it.**

- **This was the origin of the church's departure from simplicity, and its fall into clerical authority and worldliness - the cause of the loss of its spiritual authority.** The saints went out, left the world and worldly religion by going out, to meet the Bridegroom. It characterised them as a present thing. It was recalled to its primitive position and liveliness by the renewal of the immediate expectation of Him. He did tarry, in fact; and the sense of His coming was lost. "Behold the Bridegroom cometh!" was what aroused and prepared them. No events, no earthly circumstances, intervene or modify the direct summons. They go out to meet Him. There is no other thought, no confusion with the government of this world, none of any previous dealing in respect of the marriage-feast (His union with the Jews). They go back with Him to it.
- **That the apostle lived in, and taught, this immediate expectation, as the proper primitive doctrine of the Spirit of God, is evident, whatever degree of light as to detail may have been possessed.** The Thessalonians were converted to wait for God's Son from heaven; with very little clearness of light; but they had been so taught, and Paul approves of their expectation as a divine witness to the world, of which the world itself spake. It was his manner of entering in - they were waiting for Him. It was not a prophetic explanation of events they possessed: **there is no event, I repeat, between us and heaven. God's Son was coming from heaven; and they were waiting for Him as the fruit of Paul's entering in among them, owned and delighted in by himself. They drew certain conclusions from it in which they erred, which Paul corrected (as he did another mistake, induced by false teachers, in the second epistle); but their constant expectation was right. The word even is used only here, and speaks of awaiting; but Paul was doing as much. He speaks to them of "we which are alive and remain to the coming of the Lord." We are told this is a class. Be it so. But it is a class in which Paul reckons himself, shewing that that class could and ought so to await the coming of the Lord.**" (*Collected Writings*, 11:149-157)

### **The End of the First Man and the Christian's Position**

- "The testing of man in the O.T. revealed what was in man, man as standing in Adamic responsibility. It manifested his depravity. In Israel, the law addressed the first man (I Cor. 14:47) in a people specially cultivated by God placing them in favorable circumstances to see if the blessing could be obtained by man's effort. The law did not address the child of God as such.

The law made no distinction regarding whether or not those under it were children of God. Indeed, many were not. National Israel was a mixture. One of the fruits of Christ's death was to end that mixture (John 1:12; 11:51-52). Providing a basis upon which the children of God could form a visible community of the saved depended upon the ending of the standing of the first man in Adamic responsibility. Adam had eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (responsibility) but not of the tree of life. The law did not answer to the tree of life. If a man kept the law perfectly, he would continue to live his natural life, but that is not what Scripture calls eternal life.

- The first man put the Lord Jesus on the cross, the cross where the standing of the first man, as under Adamic responsibility, was brought to an end. It was the first man's crowning act of declaring himself totally lost. Thus Paul, and we also, can say, "I am crucified with Christ." I, in responsibility in my standing in Adam, the first man, am crucified with Christ. What I am as connected with the first man is removed from before God. What is my standing and responsibility now? After tracing the history of failure of the first man, JND wrote:" (Huebner, 59)
  - "Now, although the ground of man's responsibility is over in the sense of having wholly failed under it, when proved in every possible way, yet as to moral dealing with each individual, the responsibility is there to the full; and as an individual under moral dealing, a man has to go through the history of the process of responsibility and its failure; but he goes through it to bring out this, that he is lost already. He has to prove the truth of God's verdict that in man there is no good thing; and so the result of the principle of responsibility is for him to find out that he is lost, that the responsibility is over; not as if it was not true, but because he is lost and ruined, as the man who has lost all his money by foolish ways. It is important to keep up responsibility, **but the individual is brought to the consciousness that on that ground it is all up with him. Man is lost. We have spent every farthing, and have only debts; these we have if that is any good. It is all over with the first man, and no mending of him will do: he is lost and ruined; but Christ came to save the lost.**
  - **Now the Second Man is set up. It is not a mending of the first man, but the substitution of the Second. There is no improvement or correction of the first man (although we are practically changed if we come to Christ), but the sins of the first Adam are all cleared away; and, secondly, the tree itself is cut down by the roots for faith. In the cross we see the responsibility met completely; Christ has met all the failure, the fruit of the tree of responsibility, and has glorified God in so doing. Man has brought in confusion; but Christ came, met the case, and cleared the scene, and triumphed over all.** When He came, God's character as to facts was compromised, and there was no escape. If He had saved none, but at once cast off sinners, it were righteousness, but there would have been no love. If He had let all pass, when man was a sinner, and in such sort saved all (which man would call love, but which would not have been divine love, for God is holy), where were the righteousness? But Christ came. Well, surely in the cross there is righteousness against sin, as nowhere else, yet there is the infinite love of God to sinners.
  - **In Him, in Christ, I get both the trees of Paradise united, fulfilled in grace, bearing our sins and putting away sin by the sacrifice of Himself, and becoming life according to righteousness. I am brought to the discovery of what I am, and then I see Christ has died on the cross and has taken the whole thing on Himself. When I**

see Him - the Son of God - dying on the cross, I say if this is not righteous judgment against sin - I do not know what is. But whom is He dying for? - the guilty sinner. Well, if this is not love, I do not know what is. On the cross we get every attribute of God perfectly maintained - His majesty and truth, as well as His righteousness and love - every claim met, and God perfectly glorified in the Person of Christ, the Lamb of God. He was there making atonement for sin that the gospel might go out to all the world; and as to believers, bearing their every sin. The whole thing is met there, and the believer's responsibility cleared away, as to sins, that he may enter into responsibility on a new ground, that of a child of God. He has met fully, and completely, and absolutely, all the fruit of man's eating the tree and all the sins of the believer (his responsibility). This, of course, does not touch the believer's responsibility to Christ or to God as a believer in Christ; for this is of a new order, and comes in upon a different ground.

- But in the cross God's character is not only maintained but fully glorified; for the death of Christ is the perfect putting away of sin\* and of all that belonged to the first man. We, therefore, as believers, are crucified with Christ; we are not in the flesh but in Christ. We are dead to the condition in which we were as children of Adam, and we are in a new position altogether; in Christ we are children of God. All that we were has been met and settled on the cross, and a new life has been given to us, so that now we are not in the first Adam but in the Second Man. The fruit of the first is all taken away, and the tree itself cut up by the roots for our faith; we have died with Christ, been crucified with Him. The responsibility is met by the atonement, and He Himself is the eternal life; so the two trees of Paradise are fully reconciled. . .
- We have thus the two trees in grace - the tree of life, and the tree of responsibility. Under the law we saw it was responsibility first, and then life. In grace it is first life, then responsibility.
- Not only are my sins gone, but I and everything belonging to me buried in the death of Christ; the "I" merged into Him as to life, as it is written, "Yet not I, but Christ liveth in me," and the life I now live is in the Risen One. He rose, and is now seated in glory in virtue of what He did as man, and has sent down the Holy Ghost to unite to Himself as Head (having taken this place as man in heaven) believers as members of His body, and to reveal all the counsels that were about us before the world was; and this is the church. The Christian is united with Christ, where He now is, we are seated there, and blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Him. The Head is there, and we, the members, are, by the Holy Ghost, united to Him.
- Now comes in the responsibility of the Christian. True responsibility flows from the place we are in - not as having to get into the place, but as being in it. Seeing our place we can learn what our responsibilities are; else we never can assume responsibility. You are not responsible to me as children or servants, because you are not my children or my servants. If you were my servant, your duties and responsibilities would flow from your being so. You have totally failed as a child of Adam; and now, if a believer, God says you are a child of God. Well, now, let us see if you are walking as a child of God in all your ways. This is our responsibility. We are heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, and are left in this world to shew out the character of such. We are the epistle of Christ, and have to see that we are a

**good one, known and manifestly so before all men. Christ should be so seen in us that he who runs may read.**

- **If you are in Christ, Christ is in you; and our place is a settled one. Christ is before God for us, and we are before the world for Christ. What is laid on us is not responsibility before God as a child of Adam, but as a child of God. I am not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, and the life of Jesus is to be manifested in our mortal bodies. There is our responsibility, and it is an individual thing. You will see the individual put always first in scripture, because the individual must be put right before there can be any church. The epistle to the Romans deals with the individual, so also does the first chapter to the Ephesians, till we come to the last verses. We always have truth brought out for the individual before corporate blessing is unfolded or responsibility is enforced. We are saved by Christ individually and owned as brethren.**
- This leads on to relationship with Christ and with one another. Our relationship with the Father is that of children; our relationship with Christ, first, that He is not ashamed to call us brethren, and then as members of His body, and so baptised into one body by the Holy Ghost. This is the effect of God's work, and we are created unto good works, which God has fore-ordained for us. The ground we stand on is not our works: Christ stood on that ground once for us, and if we did we should be lost. We stand on Christ's work and are saved, and the Holy Ghost has come down and united us to Christ as His members; and he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit.
- This brings out what the church of God is. The Holy Ghost never came down to earth before that, although He was the immediate agent of all God's works. All immediate action from creation onwards is the Holy Ghost - He is the direct agent, but never came till the day of Pentecost. . .
- We get before that (in Deut. 32: 43) such a word as "Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people"; but there is His people: the nationality is kept up, and the Gentiles are kept distinct from His people. The Jews were the people who had the promises; but the One in whom all the promises centred came, and they refused and crucified Him; so they must now come in on the ground of mercy like any poor Gentile. There is no difference, for they have all alike sinned. God fulfilled His promise, but the Jew who had it rejected the fulfilment. So then the middle wall of partition could be broken down, for both came alike under mercy. All nationality now is merged in Christ. He now sits in glory as man, and the Holy Ghost whom He has sent down links us with Him. The distinction of Jew and Gentile is abolished, and the church is the dwelling-place of the Holy Ghost. If you had had a mention of the church in the Old Testament, Judaism must have gone. The church is a heavenly body, the Head being in heaven.
- **Now, if you appropriate Old Testament promises and apply them to the church, you drag it down from heaven to earth, and put Israel quite out of that place which God in His sovereignty gave to His chosen people.** Individually we get much comfort for our hearts and instruction, too, from God's dealings with Israel; for (besides great truths as to God's nature), what happened to them happened to them for ensamples, and is written for our admonition on whom the ends of the world are come. See, for instance, Deuteronomy 8: 2-4, which is the history of God's dealings with them in the wilderness. So we too, in a spiritual sense, are put through the wilderness, and learn God's care of us and our continual dependence on Him for every need and each step of the way. God took care

even of the wearing out of their coats all the time, while He sought to teach them what they were. We are in the wilderness, and need to learn to know the God of the wilderness. We are left here to find out both what we are and what He is, and we have the same principles to guide us as led Israel in their wanderings.

- **Being children of God, however, our home is the Father's house, and Christ has gone there to prepare a place for us. This leads us at once to the coming of Christ, not as a matter of prophecy, but for us, as He said, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself, that where I am there ye may be also," John 14. This is not prophecy, which is concerned with the government of this world, and is connected with the Jews who are the centre of prophecy. We are identified with Christ, and were in the counsels of God before even the world was, and so are not of the world at all. He has promised to come first and put us in our right place beside Himself; and when prophecy comes true we shall be with the Lord. We are in heavenly places in Christ, and our conflict is there now; "we wrestle . . . against spiritual wickedness in heavenly places." (Collected Writings, 32:236-244)**
- “We considered that the call of Abraham had two aspects, one national and another individual. One is for ‘earthly places’ so to speak and the other heavenly. The Christian’s calling is altogether heavenly. Neither the Christian nor the church has had governmental power committed. The Christian finds himself in a heavenly parenthesis of being seated in the heavenlies, in Christ Jesus, during the wider parenthesis of Gentile judgment on Israel, i.e., the times of the Gentiles. . . God has not called the Christians to seize this power, or infiltrate it. The epistles tell him to be subject and to maintain a good conscience directed by the Word of God. To seek governmental power, united with calling, is, therefore, *to Judaize*. It has long been observed that those who seek governmental power now, especially postmillenarians, seek their model in the word of Jehovah to Israel in the O.T. and yet such accuse “dispensationalists of Judaizing.” (Huebner, 63)

### **The Ruin of the Church**

- “J.N. Darby understood that the body of Christ was complete on earth at every moment, just as it was on the day of Pentecost when it was formed. . . It is the divine intention that the body will display its unity on earth. Christ power will display it someday, but the body is here to express His holy will. There has been a ruin of the keeping of the unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3). Keeping the unity of the Spirit means giving practical expression to the unity that the Spirit formed. The ruin of this does not, of course, disconnect a Christian from the actual Spirit constituted unity with Christ and the other members of the one body. . . The church fell at the end of the apostolic age but before the apostles were all gone. . . In the divine purpose, the church, as God has constituted it, cannot be ruined. The testimony to be born regarding the church as a testimony to unity with the head in heaven, and to one another, as members of one body on earth, put into man’s hands, has been ruined.” (Huebner, 73) In 1827 JND said:
  - “For my part, when I found all in ruin around me, my comfort was that, where two or three were gathered together in Christ's name, there He would be (Matt. 18:20).” (*Letters*, 1:113)
- Important writings of JND on the subject of the ruin of the church include: *What the Christian Has Amid the Ruin of the Church*, “Of the Ruin of the Present Dispensation” in *On the Formation*

of Churches and “On the Ruin of the Church” in *A Glance at Various Ecclesiastical Principles*. Another important paper is his *What is the Church and in What Sense is it Now in Ruin?* In his *On the Epistle to the Ephesians* we read the following:

- **“Many dear brethren have been troubled at the expression “the ruin of the church”; now I can quite understand this, and I make no complaint about their jealousy lest it should be thought that the church could fail, because in one sense it is impossible that the church can be ruined; but there is confusion in some minds between the purposes of God, and present dispensation in which man is placed under responsibility. In speaking of the ruin of the church, we speak of it as down here, set to manifest Christ's glory in unity on the earth, and we must remember that there we are placed, and as in this responsibility, there we must stay.** If it could fail spiritually it would be disastrous indeed! There are two thoughts respecting the church in ruin which are full of mischief. The thought on some brethren's minds is, that we intend by this the interruption of God's purpose, which evidently cannot be. There is a jealousy, which I respect and for which I have no regret, lest the idea of the church in ruin should seem to affect the purpose of God. **As regards the purpose of God the church cannot be ruined, but as regards its actual present condition as a testimony for God on earth it is in ruin.** The other thought is: Well, suppose it is in ruin, so it must be; there we are and there we must stay; so that we are saved at last, never mind; we will take no thought about the present condition of the church, being satisfied that we are saved from the wrath to come. This listlessness and hanging down of the hands, causing cessation of all spiritual energy, is induced by a want of apprehension of what the church is in God's sight. But practically many saints think they are to remain content in the ruin. There is danger in taking up such a thought, because it would be the denial of the power of God. To unbelief discouragement may be the result of this idea of the church's ruin, but I do not look at it as discouragement, because I believe the grace and power of the Lord is suited to the need of the church *such as it is* at all times. I should feel it to be a very sad effect if the expression “ruin of the church” were to dishearten a soul about the operation of the Spirit in bringing blessing to the church. Neither of the suppositions I have alluded to can be proved, for it is impossible that the church can be in utter ruin in the sense of upsetting God's purpose, or that the *power of the Lord* is enfeebled when there is actual present ruin. His working will be according to the *state the church is in*, not to the state she is not in. We are all liable from the feebleness of our minds to say too much or too little, even where truth is held. Man is in a sad state, and I should get disheartened unless I saw the power of Christ to meet that state. **God's purpose, of course, is unfailing, and therefore it is not true that the church can fail as it exists in God's purpose.** What we want is not so much an abstract notion that the church will be saved, but real practical faith in the application of the resources of God to meet present circumstances. If a Christian is in a bad state, and I do not look beyond it to Christ I am troubled, but if I do I have confidence, and in that sense I am at rest, because I know the Lord can and will bring it right by His power working for him. I should feel sorry if seeing failure should enfeeble faith as to the Lord's care of the church, and I have felt the danger of this; still I say He introduces blessing according to the present condition of the church. We must not say, if we are looking for blessing in the path of faith, the church is sure to be brought through according to God's purpose of grace, it would produce listlessness; we have to look to the present working of His power in blessing to glorify Christ. God always takes an interest in the church's circumstances, and if we are looking for blessing, we shall find it even in times of the greatest failure, for God will have His church in glory, and living faith sees not only the need, but sees also the thoughts and mind of the Lord about that need, and counts on the present love of the Lord. It is as true

of an individual as of the church. As having the Spirit of Christ I cannot rest in the thought that a Christian is secure in Christ, and therefore not endeavour to instruct and exhort him and lead him on. **The church will be saved, and so will every member of it; but if I have the affections of Christ, I cannot be contented unless I see the power of the Spirit in any individual saint manifesting that saint's relationship to Christ, and just so is it with the church of God; if my faith is in exercise, I am not satisfied unless I see the carrying out of its relationship to Christ as a present thing.** (*Collected Writings*, 32:393)

- In the midst of this ruin, were those who gathered together in Christ's name.
  - “First, allow me to say that the assemblies of so-called "Plymouth Brethren," far from calling themselves the "assembly" or "the church of God" in a particular place, have always formally opposed the title. So little truth is there in the insinuation, that it is principally this which has hindered these brethren from forming part of the Rochat flock. They believe that they alone are assembled upon the true principle of the church of God, which I in no wise doubt: but they believe that the church is in ruins, and that the pretension to be the church of God in a place would be a false pretension. **I add that, if all the Christians in a place were to be found gathered together which would form (according to order) the assembly of the place, I would not give it that title, because the universal church is not gathered; and I do not believe in independent churches. I believe that there were formerly local churches representing in a certain sense the whole in their localities; but we are very far from that now.** All who have taken the trouble to inquire know, or might have known, that from the first the brethren in question have taken their stand upon the principle of Matthew 18 as a resource given of God in the general ruin. The pretension to be the assembly of God has always been rejected by the brethren we speak of. Every assembly gathered by the will of God around the Person of Jesus or in His name is *an* assembly of God, if it be only a question of the force of words; but when it is a question of being *the* assembly of God in a locality, it is not so in the true sense of the word, and could not be so, considering the state of the universal church. It may gather together on the principle of the church of God, may find the promised blessing, may be the only one gathered according to that principle in the place, and may attach immense importance to it (and it ought to attach immense importance to it, if it desire to be obedient and faithful); but it is only the witness for God so far as by its separate walk it testifies to the faithfulness of God, to the divine principles which govern its walk and to the true state in which the church is found as a whole. In this case it will be God's witness; certainly it ought to be so.” (*Collected Writings*, 20:296-297)

### **Closing Remarks and Observations**

- The following is a summary of JND's teaching regarding the nature of the current dispensation, i.e., heavenly parenthesis that can be gleaned from the quotations presented above:
  - Christ's headship over the heavenly sphere is not revealed in the O.T.
  - Body of Christ has not replaced Israel.

- The current dispensation is a heavenly parenthesis that began in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost and lasts till the Rapture. In short, the church started in Acts 2 with the coming of the Holy Spirit.
- The current heavenly parenthesis is not the subject of prophecy. This doctrine was hid in God and wholly unknown to the saints of the O.T. Therefore the church is not the subject of prophecy.
- The church is never named in the Epistles but by Paul. It would not be a stretch to maintain that JND viewed the church as a unique Pauline revelation.
- The church = Jew and Gentile being builded together as a habitation of God through the spirit. The middle wall of partition has been broken down and of the twain (i.e., Jew and Gentile) God is forming the one new man.
- The Church is seated with Christ in the heavenly places.
- JND understood the difference between the Rapture (I. Thess. 4) and the Appearing (Rev. 19). Since the church is seated with Christ in the heavenlies no earthly event needs to precede the catching away of the church. Therefore, the rapture, the blessed hope of the church, ought to be the immediate expectation of the Church. Denial of this glorious event robbed the church of its glorious heavenly position and replaced it with an earthly position that the church was not given.
- Despite the accuracy of the summary points presented above, JND does teach some things that appear to be suspect that honest students of Darby must keep in mind.
  - Because JND limits his definition of a dispensation to the governmental dealings of God in the earth he says that the church is not properly called a dispensation.
  - JND also maintains that the heavenly parenthesis has not changed the age. Therefore, Darby holds that we are still living in “this age/world” that Christ spoke of while he was on earth, which began with the giving of the law under Moses.
- JND understood the nature of positional truth and some of the basics of Grace Life thinking.
  - JND believed that the sins of the first Adam (man) were completely cleared away by the sacrifice of Christ. The death of Christ was the perfect putting away of sin. The believer’s sins are totally forgiven.
  - The believer’s responsibility regarding his sins has been cleared away. Therefore we are dead to the position we had in Adam (first man) and given a new position in Jesus Christ (second man) as children of God.
  - Believers are to manifest in their flesh the new life in Jesus Christ that they have been given.

- Believers are identified with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection and were in the counsel of God before the world began.
- Applying O.T. promises to church drags it down from heaven to earth.
- Having left professional organized religion, JND viewed the church on earth as being in a state of ruin. Positionally, in Christ the church is not in ruin and cannot be so. Experientially, however, the present testimony of the church on earth was in a state of ruin. According to Darby, the church on earth entered this state of ruin before the end of the Apostolic Era. While he does not explicitly say so, it might not be reading too much into JND to think that ruin entered the church through the failure to acknowledge and maintain Pauline authority.

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