

"TILL I COME" — "I AM COMING AGAIN"

—A. E. Bouter

To encourage His disciples during the time of His absence, the Lord Jesus has given a special promise contained in the above words ("while I am coming," Lk. 19:13; Jn. 14:3). Our Lord gave this promise while expressing His desire that we should be servants ready for His, our Master's, return. But not only that, He desires us to be diligently occupied with His interests in this world, where He was rejected.

I would like to share five passages that speak of our present responsibilities in view of the coming of Christ. Sometimes people think that the idea of the Lord's coming is "for dreamers only." However, the Scriptures we will refer to address very down-to-earth matters. On the one hand they search our hearts as to the motives and objectives of our activities. On the other hand they encourage us to be faithful to our Lord Jesus out of love for Him who gave Himself for us (Gal. 2:20).

The Bible links the important theme of our service in view of His coming with the various roles Christians have as (1) bondmen, (2) disciples, (3) brothers and sisters, (4) witnesses, and (5) lovers of the Lord Jesus Christ. We will, therefore, consider how the expectation of His coming affects us in these five areas. While going over these five roles, let us ask ourselves the question: Am I really a bondman of Christ, a true disciple, a good brother or sister, a faithful witness, and do I really love the Lord?

Bondmen or Servants — "Occupy till I come" (Luke 19:11-26)

The disciples and people around the Lord Jesus, hearing about salvation which, in the Person of Christ, had in grace come to Zacchaeus' house, were wondering whether the kingdom of God was about to be immediately manifested (Lk. 19:11). They thought that the Lord was soon going to reign in public glory. Instead, the Lord made it clear that He would go to "a distant country." Therefore, He was going to commit His interests into the hands of servants. Speaking in parable form, He referred to those who confess His name during the period of His public absence. The ten bondmen or slaves (often translated "servants") each received a mina or pound. The number ten underlines man's responsibility, whereas the one pound shows that the Lord conveys essentially the same to each of us. Thus we all — believers, disciples in the kingdom of God — have the same "amount" of grace (Luke's special theme) available to us. The question is: How will we use this for the Master?

Are we diligently serving Christ's interests although He is absent, even for a long time? Let me illustrate this point. The gardener of an Italian count acquitted himself of his job faithfully by keeping the large garden of the estate permanently in an excellent condition. His master had not been home for many years because he was an ambassador to a far country. The gardener, a brother in Christ, used to say: "My master may come today, and everything needs to be in order for him." Because we have received all things freely, we should serve our Lord as well as the gardener served his (1 Cor 4:7). Our Lord expects us to give an account of how we have used our time, our abilities, our privileges, during His absence.

Although He is rejected in this world, we have the task to represent our Lord Jesus in this scene of His rejection. In fact, this is the way the kingdom finds its moral expression today: it is entrusted to the hands of man. Thus, we, as His disciples, must be subject to the Lord Jesus before we will reign with Him, and our reigning with Him will be according to the measure to which we have been faithful. He expects us to be active, productive, diligent — not in the strength of the flesh, nor with human strategies, but in the power of the Spirit and guided by the Word of God. Let us notice also that it is not a mere matter of orthodoxy (portrayed in the one who put his pound in a towel), but it is a question of love for our Master. This latter point is demonstrated in the two servants who acquired ten or five additional minas. Let us apply this parable to ourselves, by asking this searching question: Are we, like servants the Lord can rely on, faithfully occupied with His interests?

Discipleship — "Follow Me . . . until I come" (John 21:19-23)

Closely connected to this last question, is the following one: Are we disciples who follow the Lord Jesus as He has walked on this earth? In pondering this question, let us consider what happened in John 21 after Christ's resurrection. Through God's infinite grace the Lord restored Peter to fellowship with Himself and with the other disciples. Then He said: "Follow

Me." But Peter, turning round, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following, and asked Him, "What shall this man do?" The answer is remarkable: "If I will that he abide until I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou Me."

We can learn from this event that we are to simply follow the Lord no matter what happens (see, for instance, Phil. 2:1-5). Instead of minding other people's business as Peter did, we should truly follow the Lord. This He also asks from us. By taking His yoke upon us, we learn from Him, and gradually we will be transformed to His image. This is not only our duty, it is also an urgent necessity as well as a matter of response of love, as we see so beautifully demonstrated in John's life. Therefore, let's not allow any obstacle — even well intentioned ones — to come between the Lord and us. Three aspects of John's relationship with the Lord are worth considering:

1. Five times he is called "the disciple whom Jesus loved." It wasn't that the Lord didn't love the other disciples, but John did not allow anything to come in between himself and the Lord, so that there was an unhindered flow of communion.
2. John was characterized by his love for the Lord (that is why I said earlier that discipleship is a matter of response), which expressed itself in his following the Lord.
3. John enjoyed such an intimate relationship with the Lord that he knew His thoughts and could rely on Him rather than on his own intelligence or abilities (John 21:20; cf. Prov. 3:5). Let us follow the Lord, lean on Him!

Till He comes: Christian Relationships — "Judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come" (1 Cor. 4:1-5)

There is another matter for us to consider. The issue of what and when to judge and not to judge. This often meets with much misunderstanding. Based on this verse, and on what the Lord says in Matthew 7:1, some think that we should *never* judge. However, in the same passage the Lord shows that we should be able to make a difference, and judge. Similarly, Paul explains the need for judging self, sin, the flesh, the world, and such matters. In the passage referred to at the heading of this paragraph, the point is not only that we should not judge the servant who belongs to Another (namely to the Lord, as explained in Romans 14), but rather that we should not judge the motives of our brothers and sisters. Our business is simply to do the Master's will. Judging God's servants, as the Corinthians were doing (1 Cor. 1-4), is taking God's place. Not only that, they did it at the wrong time (long before it was due!), and using the wrong standards, namely their own prejudices and preferences.

The above passage deals with many issues like stewardship, service, accountability, and Paul's own example. For now, we focus on verse 5. We need to function unhindered in our relationships as brothers and sisters in Christ until the Lord comes. By judging one another's motives or the counsels of the heart, we effectively destroy good relationships. What is the remedy? Putting the coming of the Lord always before our hearts and minds will protect us against many evils, also against the evil of judging one another. To avoid misunderstandings, we need to judge where Scripture teaches us so to do so; we must refrain from judging where God's Word tells us so. Let us care for God's people, like Paul, Apollos, Timothy, and many others before us have done. How shall the Lord find us? Judging wrongfully or rightly caring?

Witnesses — "What ye have hold fast till I shall come" (Rev. 2:25)

In Revelation 2-3 we read about the seven churches or assemblies, who are placed in this world as witnesses of the Lord Jesus who is now in heaven (cf. what we saw under Lk. 19). The forsaking of first love for Him (Rev. 2:4) opened the door to all kinds of mischief and trouble. I compare this with Matthew 24:48, where we read: "But if that evil bondman should say in his heart, My lord delays to come." On the positive side, the Lord encourages His people — even in the darkest days of Thyatira — to be a witness for Him, not only individually but also collectively, as indicated in this paragraph heading.

Our English word "martyr" is derived from the Greek word for witness. The first Christian witness-martyr was Stephen (Acts 7), who died for his heavenly Master. Surely, Stephen was ready for His coming. Not only that: his Master was ready for him, because Stephen saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God, ready to help him and to receive him into glory. Are we witnesses, not only individually but also collectively, as a local assembly? "Till I come."

Right from the beginning of the Church's history departure began. It is important to realize that John's ministry is characterized by what is essential in order to preserve the believers in the knowledge and enjoyment of God's blessings. In short, John brings us back to first love! He presents to his readers things that remain till the end and thus he gives strength to the overcomer. The Church as a professing body has lost this first love (Rev. 2:4). More than that, it has forsaken it.

Nevertheless, whenever there is failure in the public testimony, we find that John addresses the individual believer. He

does so in order to restore the believer to first love and to keep him or her in this condition and relationship till the very end, that is, till the Lord's coming at the rapture. The unfolding of Christ's glory throughout the book of Revelation, before the coming of the Lord in public display, has a moral result. It prepares the Church, the true bride, to be ready for the Bridegroom. The Spirit and the bride say: "Come" (Rev. 22:17). This is the only word the bride publicly speaks; it is an expression of desire, of longing, of love, of anxious waiting. Only in this condition can we be true witnesses. This also shows that there is a close link between being a servant, disciple, witness, and lover of Christ.

The Language of Love — "Do this in remembrance of me...until He come" (1 Cor. 11:23-28)

Am I anticipating the Lord's coming? What is the impact of this expectation? Celebrating the Lord's supper in a way that answers to His prescriptions given through the apostle Paul will certainly help us to be ready for His coming. It will also help us to serve Him well while waiting and to be His witnesses. Let's briefly review what we have seen up to this point. The Lord Jesus expects His people (bought with His precious blood) to function in four capacities:

- to serve Him, as faithful servants;
- to follow Him, as committed disciples;
- to live worthily as those whom He calls His brethren;
- to be His witnesses, representing Him in a world that rejects Him.

All this cannot be realized, unless there is a deep love commitment to Him: we love Him because He first loved us. This is exactly what is expressed in the Lord's Supper. By it we are reminded of Christ's wonderful, unfathomable love, and we may respond to this love in remembering Him. That sets the tone for the functioning in the capacities just mentioned. But, before all, we need to function as true lovers of Him, in remembering Him, who is our Beloved, the Lover of our souls! The proclamation of "the death of the Lord" is in view of His coming (1 Cor. 11:26). The believers, in following those instructions, are a witnessing company ("ye announce or proclaim the death of the Lord"). And this they will be as they continue all that they are doing (as bondmen, disciples, witnesses, brothers) in the light of His soon coming.

Remembering the Lord implies first a moral obligation of self-judgment and spiritual preparation; but also the putting into practice of the other four responsibilities we have considered earlier. Ultimately, all comes down to a question of love for Him, and of respect for and honour of "the Lord" whom we love.

After Napoleon's failed invasion of Russia in 1812, the soldiers who had survived, returned to their respective home countries. Among the women who waited for their loved ones to return, a young Austrian lady was wearing her wedding dress. However, her beloved had lost his life on the battlefield and she waited in vain till at last she also died. She had been ready for her bridegroom.

Are we also ready for our Beloved? What about our wedding dress (see Rev. 19:8)? Yes, we will receive it by the grace of God, but it consists of the practical *acts of righteousness* during our lives. What else does this ask from us than to remain faithful to Him, although we are in a world that rejected Him? How better could we prepare for His coming than by serving Him faithfully, by following His footsteps and example, by representing Him in good brotherly relationships, by being His witnesses, and by doing what He asked us to do: "This do in remembrance of Me"? "Until He come!"

The Battle of Conquerors (9)

—G. H. Elbers

Chapter 10

"Stand therefore, having girt about your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and shod your feet with *the* preparation of the glad tidings of peace: besides all *these*, having taken the shield of faith with which ye will be able to quench all the inflamed darts of the wicked one. Have also the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's word; praying at all seasons, with all prayer and supplication..." (Eph. 6:14-18)

An 'Isir Hempi.' [This is a Suriname word based on the Dutch. The English equivalent would be 'iron shirt.' Drop the r's and get something like 'ion shut.'] A cuirass or breastplate.

We now come to the second part of the armour, the 'breastplate of righteousness.' In order to have a better understanding of this part, we must picture a soldier from earlier days. You may have seen one in a painting. The Roman

soldier, for example, had a sword, a bow, or a spear in his hand, and a helmet on his head, but he also had a metal protection around the top half of his body. That was called a 'cuirass' or a 'breastplate.' If darts were fired at him or if he was involved in a man-to-man sword-fight, the iron shirt was there to protect him. We find the same with knights who lived several centuries ago. In pictures we see that even the horses wore a sort of metal cloak.

Such a breastplate was therefore a protection of uttermost importance! Soldiers would think twice before going into battle without it!

Having Put on (Dressed): Living in It...

In Ephesians 6:14 we read that, covered with it, the believer must take up his position: having put on the breastplate of righteousness. Clearly, he must not put it on during the battle; that could well be too late. You don't put on your swimming suit *while* you are swimming, do you? You do it ahead of time!

There is something special in these words 'having on' or 'being dressed.' Someone dressed in a uniform is recognizable; you can, for example, recognize his rank. Or, when a child wears a school uniform, you can see where he or she goes to school. Also, putting on can be translated 'wrapping up' or 'living in it.' We must especially keep the latter in mind. Let us read about examples of being (recognizably) dressed, first from the book Genesis.

In Genesis 37:3 we read that Joseph received a coat of many colors from Jacob. Whenever he wore it, it was clear to everyone that he had a special place in his father's heart. His clothing was a witness of something, it showed something!

In Genesis 37:34 we read that Jacob thought that Joseph had been torn apart by wild animals. Jacob's response was to put on mourning clothes. He wrapped himself up in such a way that everyone could see that He was sorrowful. Here too, the clothes brought a message.

In Genesis 41:42 we read that Pharaoh arrayed Joseph with a fine linen vesture. This 'wrapping' showed everyone that now Joseph had an especially high position; in fact, he had kingly power.

These are just a few random examples of the many we can find in the Bible. We discover that by wearing certain clothes, people show something about their lives and even about their way of life. Their dress, or wrapping, was therefore a witness.

Similarly, in Isaiah 61:10 we are pointed to the Lord Jesus! He says here that God hath clothed Him with the garments of salvation and with the robe of righteousness. We could say that the Lord Jesus lived in them... and so it is. Everyone could see this; it was His witness before God and men. Reading in the Bible about the life of the Lord Jesus here on earth, we recognize it as well. The question then presses upon us: how is it with us? Are we recognizable when the word 'righteousness' comes up? And — do we live in it?

A Breastplate Protects the Heart

A closer study of Ephesians 6:14 teaches us that we must take up our position, covered with a breastplate. As explained in the introduction to this chapter, a soldier must cover himself with the breastplate in advance. The enemy would be all too happy to immediately shoot a dart into the soldier's heart. After all, the first blow is half the battle. When an opponent's hand, leg, or ear is cut off, he is 'only' handicapped, but if the heart is hit, it is immediately and forever finished!

God supplies us with an armour by which the heart is protected! This is necessary, because our heart has such a vital function in our lives! Scripture teaches that the heart is the place of affection, where plans are made. It is the starting point of all our actions.

In Jeremiah 17:9 the Lord says that "the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked." We read about the consequences of this in Genesis 6:5 and 8:21. The imagination of man's heart only produces evil, Solomon asks in Proverbs 20:9: "Who can say I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?" Nobody!

Conversion Changes the Heart

The same Solomon (see 1 Ki. 3:12) asked the Lord to give him understanding to discern between good and evil. Then the

Lord gave him a wise and understanding heart. It was the desire of the king that his plans, words, and deeds would be in harmony with those of God. To accomplish this, a change, a new heart, was needed. Romans 12:2 says: "But be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

Yes, each person is in need of renewal which only comes about through conversion. In 2 Corinthians it says twice that one who is converted is a new creation. Romans 10:10 even says that with the heart one believes to righteousness!

God has changed our heart for the better! He has done this by pouring His love into our hearts through His Spirit which He has given (Rom. 5:5). Thereby we can in return show our love to Him in all our actions, in our thinking. And now we have received the power to walk in His ways.

Breastplate of Righteousness

When Satan and his demons see what lives in the heart of the believer, they try their best to change that — for the worse, of course. Satan fires his darts at the center where our 'plans are born,' where our love for something or somebody originates. He would love to introduce anger, infidelity, harshness, and unrighteousness into our manner of life or, for that matter, anything that conflicts with the righteousness of God, because, obviously, that righteousness is what it's all about. That's where the attacks are aimed at.

God's Righteousness

The Lord would like us to walk in His pathways and stay in close contact with Him. For this our heart must be directed toward Him. Do we want to have effective protection against the attacks of the devil, so that our heart is not influenced by wrong thoughts, plans, or ideas? Then we must keep our sights on God's righteousness and seek it. Just like the Lord Jesus explained to the people around Him: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness," that is, the righteousness after God's thoughts. It is not human in character, concerning itself with discrimination or the relationships between rich and poor, employers and employees, and such. God's righteousness concerns everything that can be put to the test, comparing it with His will and His thoughts. It is totally different from human righteousness; it is perfect and eternal. When we as humans beings think something is good, it does not mean that God can agree with it. It is just as we read several times in the Book of Judges. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes (17:6; 21:25). But that was totally wrong! How, then, can we mortals know what is right?

Only in the light of God's righteousness will we be able to recognize unrighteousness immediately! Righteousness must radiate out from us; we must live in it and be covered with it. Thereby we will be recognizable, just like Joseph, and just like the Lord Jesus. That is to the honour of God, and that is the purpose of our life here on earth.

Chapter 11

"Stand therefore, having girt about your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and shod your feet with *the* preparation of the glad tidings of peace: besides all *these*, having taken the shield of faith with which ye will be able to quench all the inflamed darts of the wicked one. Have also the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's word; praying at all seasons, with all prayer and supplication..." (Eph. 6:14-18).

"Stand therefore...your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace" (Eph. 6:14-15).

We have now arrived at the third 'component' of the armour of God as mentioned in Ephesians 6:14-15, and we are still dealing with what God intends to be the starting point for the battle: We must stand fast, making use of the armour of God. This is quite different from attacking and conquering! The Christian is already a conqueror in Christ and has already received every spiritual blessing in heavenly places (Eph. 1:3). When we study this third component, we must keep this firmly in mind.

Another Translation

We know that translations differ slightly from each other, though they are equally reliable (e.g., the KJV, or the New Translation by J. N. Darby). Generally the differences are quite small, but in this passage the literal translation from the Greek will help us to better understand its meaning. The NW renders this verse: "Your feet fitted with the *readiness* that

comes from the gospel of peace." The Greek uses the word *'hetoimasia'*, which can be translated as *'foundation'* or *'fundament.'* We come across the same word in the literal Hebrew translation of Psalm 89:14 "Righteousness and judgment are the *foundation* of Thy throne.

As we read this text again, we discover that we must stand very firmly in our shoes in order to be able to withstand the attacks of the devil and his henchmen! There must be a firm foundation to stand on. These thoughts agree exactly with those we have already discovered! Christians must stand firmly upon that place which they have received from the Lord. They must so position themselves that they can withstand attacks. This means, first of all, the loins girt about with truth and second, wearing the breastplate of righteousness. But what good is this great protection if you don't stand steady on your feet? If your basis is not sound? The best tank is unsuitable to shoot with precision if it wobbles. The most powerful wrestler can't achieve much if he loses his balance. No, in the battle the fighter must stand firmly on his feet. He must be well 'established'; he must therefore stand on a steady foundation!

The Very Best Foundation

That foundation is clearly mentioned in verses 14 and 15; it is the 'gospel of peace'! That must be every Christian's starting point. But not only as something to tell to others, as beautiful and necessary as that may be. Be careful! He who is not standing firm really has nothing to tell. One of the devil's aims, therefore, is to undermine this firm foundation! He wants to throw the children of God off balance. He sows doubt ('Am I really saved?' or 'Have I really received the Holy Spirit?' or 'Are my sins really forgiven?'). He also tries to interrupt the life of the assembly. He wants to destroy Christian marriages and families... you name it! Note well: we are not up against flesh and blood, but against the most evil and dark forces and powers! Blessed, blissful is the child of God who may beat off these attacks with the acquired assurance: the gospel of peace! That is his foundation; he may, as it were, point to this when the devil seeks to attack.

What Kind of Peace?

If we look at what the world understands by peace, we will soon be finished. In the world peace means nothing more than 'the absence of war.' Well, that may seem very attractive, but we know all too well that 'the absence of war' is a very fragile concept. When the League of Nations was set up, the chief aim was the banishment of war. Whoever traces the history since the League's foundation (1920), and its replacement with the United Nations (1946), must admit that today peace is scarcer than a Popsicle in the Sahara. There has been virtually not one day free of war. So, that's the peace of this world.

Christians may know real peace, the peace that has come through the Lord Jesus. In Ephesians 2:14-17 we read that He Himself is their peace, that He has declared peace to those who were far off (Gentiles) and to those who were near (Jews). This declaration is the gospel of peace, of peace with God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:1). That is a kind of peace the world doesn't know. That is what the Lord had already said to the disciples in John 14:27.

We could make a separate Bible-study of the concept 'peace.' God's peace is so perfect, so unique, that the world knows nothing about it. The fact that insignificant people, burdened and loaded with sin, can now approach God with boldness, is really something incomprehensible for people. That means that something very special must have happened. Which it did! We read in Colossians 1:19-20 that God has made peace through the Lord Jesus, and that the blood of the cross. This means: based on our Lord and Saviour's death upon the cross. It is peace bought with a high price. And it is because of this that it is of great value for those who have received the Lord Jesus.

Beating Off the Attacks!

More than once every Christian has experienced that he or she missed this peace for a while. Yes, unfortunately we have to admit this. Is that God's fault? Then, would the work of the Lord Jesus fall short in certain aspects after all? Of course not! When the Saviour called out on the cross of Calvary: "IT IS FINISHED!" there wasn't anything left to add or improve. That work of deliverance and reconciliation was complete and perfect. In other words, if we are missing peace, the problem lies with ourselves. And actually, it is an insult to the Lord Jesus if He must observe that there is a lack of peace. All those feelings of disquiet are obviously Satan's work! He is pleased if we feel poor when we are in fact rich. He thinks it's splendid if the world has its doubts about the attractiveness of being a Christian.

Our feet must be shod, based, founded, on the gospel of peace. When Satan affronts us, seeking to disturb our peace with God, then we can draw his attention to the peace of God. And vice versa. Then we can stand firm.

Walk

There is another point of interest about the use of our feet, because feet are not 'members to stand still!' They 'carry' us as we begin to move about and they bring us places. We 'walk' with our feet. That is an expression which we indeed come across seven times in the Epistle to the Ephesians (2:2,10; 4:1,17; 5:2,8,15). The spiritual significance of our 'walk' is a question of our conduct. Just think about that when we are talking about standing firm in the battle against principalities, powers, and the rulers of the darkness of this world (6:12). If our feet are shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace, that is to say that we are standing on this foundation, can we then walk as we please? No! Then our behaviour, our walk, must be influenced and determined thereby.

Mutual Strife or Peace?

Unfortunately, we Christians must often acknowledge and confess that precisely in our mutual relations very little of that peace is visible. Yes, sometimes it seems that assemblies, groups, or currents of thought are fighting each other, as if it were a question of competition.

In Ephesians 2 extra attention is given to the unity which has been brought about through the work of our Lord Jesus between those who were once near (Jews) and those who were once afar off (Gentiles). This is expressed in the verses 11-18. Also in other places Christians are called upon repeatedly to be of one mind, forgiving and bearing with one another (4:31-32).

Is such an attitude actually to be found in our midst? Or is there rather strife amongst us? In Ephesians 4:1 Paul wrote that we must now also walk worthy of the calling wherewith we have been called. And that we (v. 3) must endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the uniting bond of peace. Which calling is meant here? It is the calling to put the unity that the Spirit has brought about into practice.

That leaves no room for strife! Let us never forget that the Lord Jesus has brought peace and has reminded us in Matthew 12:25 that no house or city which is divided against itself can stand!

Of course, Satan will attack us in our walk as well! But if we walk as the Lord Jesus has walked (1 Jn. 2:6), he will have no chance to trip us up. This is because we have firm ground under our feet, the gospel of peace, an important part of the armour of God!

To be cont'd

Habakkuk (3)

—H. L. Rossier

The "Song of the Curse," Prelude to the Future Glory (Ch. 2:6-20)

The Final Answer to Habakkuk

The song of the curse is truly a poem. It consists of five strophes each of three lines, each strophe, except the fifth which deviates a little, begins with the words "Woe (un)to him." The third line of the first four strophes begins with the word "for" (or "because") and gives the impression of the old round-dances, since they draw the conclusion of the "Woe to him," that is announced in the first two lines (cf. Ex. 15:20-21). "Shall not all these take up a proverb about him, and a taunting riddle against him?" (v. 6). Our attention is drawn to the fact that it has not the simple significance of a curse uttered by the oppressed against their oppressors.

This song against the Chaldean brings us to the last days. The king who is its subject is not mentioned once, for the characteristics with which he is presented are not those of him alone. It is a *proverb, a symbolic portrayal*, that is to be understood, a *riddle* that needs to be solved; it leads us toward the establishment of Christ's glorious reign. In some respects the words "Woe to him" remind us of those we find in Isaiah 5 and Micah 2:1-2. But those are directed to Israel, whereas these are meant for the nations and their heads. This song about Babel and its king is the final answer of the Lord to the second "Why" of the prophet, and concerns the oppressor of his people (ch. 1:13).

To His servant, who on his watchtower looked for what the Lord would speak to him, God had first answered that faith was the first prerequisite for the just. Faith was not to expect the *immediate* punishment of the evil, for one must live by faith, with patience, and not count on an imminent realization of the things one hopes for. And *indeed faith is that assurance* until it is exchanged for sight.

The First Strophe

"Woe to him that increaseth that which is not his! how long? — and to him that loadeth himself with pledges! Shall they not rise up suddenly that shall bite thee, and they awake up that shall vex thee, and thou shalt be for booties unto them? Because thou hast plundered many nations, all the rest of the peoples shall plunder thee; because of men's blood, and for the violence *done* to the land, to the city, and all that dwell therein" (vv. 6-8).

The first "Woe" is pronounced over him who collects the possessions of others, goods that do not belong to him. He loads himself with a burden of goods that he pledges against usury. The same things had taken place in Israel (Amos 2:6-8). The play on words — "pledges" or "thick mud" — indicates that this detestable looting could only lead to shame for the Chaldean, that he would reap no other "advantage" than contempt because of the lowness of his act. Such behaviour is something abominable in God's eyes. How much retribution could the leaders spare themselves and the nations over which they rule if they realized the lowness of such deeds!

The "how long" from the mouths of the singing oppressed ones seems to correspond to what the prophet himself had said regarding Israel (ch. 1:2). Here the nations utter this cry.

Through faith Habakkuk had learned to exercise patience. He knew that the vision would not deceive. However, the nations that would be spared had to wait too for the fulfillment of this hope. The man who, to enrich himself, laid hold of others' goods would suddenly be attacked by those he had robbed. They would bite him as a thief jumped upon by dogs, and in turn he would fall prey to them (v. 7). Verse 8 is the sequence to and confirmation of the preceding. This man had plundered; the remnant of the nations that will be spared to experience Christ's ascension to the throne (for let us not forget that Babel's fall is but a symbol of what will take place in the last days) will in turn rob the plunderer.

This revenge will not only find its reason in the shed blood of men, but also in "the violence *done* to the land, to the city, and all that dwell therein" by this vicious nation. About the unrighteousness of his own nation the prophet had cried: "Violence" and "how long?" God had answered him that Israel would be punished for this violence by the Chaldean. Therefore, the moment would come that the nations would revenge the violence of the Chaldean against Israel. Thus, in God's governmental ways, the one revenge follows the other. Doubtless, "the land, the city, and all that dwell therein" refers to Palestine, Jerusalem, and its inhabitants. It seems, therefore, unnecessary to supply the numerous proofs of this. God never loses sight of His people. The unrighteous acts of the Chaldean, the looting and murder of which he had been guilty toward the nations would be righteously revenged. How much the more then when his violent acts were poured out over Israel. God had to temporarily set His people aside, but He will again renew His relationship with them as soon as the judgments are passed. He never forgets those who truly belong to Him. When it pleases Him to chasten them, then woe to those who, in doing so, pursue their own advantage.

Second Strophe

"Woe to him that getteth iniquitous gain to his house, that he may set his nest on high, that he may be delivered from the grasp of evil! Thou hast devised shame to thy house, by cutting off many peoples, and hast sinned against thine own soul. For the stone shall cry out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber shall answer it" (vv. 9-11).

In these verses the enemy is accused of having made unrighteous gain with the purpose of building a safe house for himself that had not to fear any disaster (see Jer. 22:13). In this way he wanted to prevent all evil. In vain, for the disaster, the "woe," would fall upon him anyway. Although each can apply these accusations to himself, they are from a to z directed to the great powers. Upon them lies a terrible and heavy responsibility. In history we see again and again that governmental leaders invade forcefully the territory of other nations, conquering it so as to enlarge their power. They thereby create the greatness of their own house by means of what they have exorted from others; they build their nest high. Did not Napoleon, and so many other emperors with him, strive to extend their power at the cost of others? The same pride drove Edom to build its nest between the stars (Obad. :4). In the final analysis all such plans do not have any other result than the demise and shame of such ambitious rulers. They discovered that they had sinned against their own soul (v. 10). Every stone, every beam of this beautiful edifice that by ambition and pride was founded on deceit became a

living testimony against the oppressor. In contrast, the believer who wants to serve God never thinks of enlarging his house. His joy and his honour consist in this, that he, like David, gathers the building materials for *the house of his God*. So did Solomon, Joash, and Josiah to enlarge the temple of the Lord, to make it firm and strong (1 Ki. 5:18; 2 Ki. 12:12; 22:5-6).

Third Strophe

"Woe to him that buildeth a town with blood, and establisheth a city by unrighteousness! Behold, is it not of Jehovah of hosts that the peoples labour for the fire, and the nations weary themselves in vain? For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of Jehovah as the waters cover the sea" (vv. 12-14).

The first "woe" spoke of the nation, the second of the "house"; the third has the capital as its subject. That is not "*the city*" (Jerusalem), as in verse 8, but a city, a town. In its direct application to the Chaldean this portion refers to Babel, that was founded on the slaughter of the nations and the blood of men. This was true too of Nineveh (Nah. 3:1). All this raging of those nations would find its end in the judgment. Their exertion would have no other result than their demise; nothing of it would remain: they "weary themselves in vain." Isn't it a serious thought that all glory, the riches, the beauty, with which the capitals are adorned, will have to vanish and sink into nothingness? Faith, however, understands this "riddle," it understands the reason for all these turn-about. The everlasting kingdom of Christ can only be established when all evil has been judged. To establish this realm unrighteousness must disappear, all that exalts itself against the Ruler of the whole earth must be cast down and brought low. The way of the Lord can only be prepared by the bringing low of every high mountain (Isa. 40:3-5). Then the whole world will know the glory of the Lord and be filled with it. Evil will, as it were, be drowned in the depths of the sea. Again and again the Lord has announced that these things will take place despite the judgments that He of necessity had to mete out. In a single verse (v. 14) we find here a sketch of the glorious millennial reign of Christ which the prophet Isaiah described in great detail. It will be the time of "the restoration of all things, of which God has spoken by the mouth of His holy prophets since time began" (Acts 3:21).

Fourth Strophe

"Woe unto him that giveth his neighbour drink, — that pourest out thy flask, and makest *him* drunken also, that thou mayest look on their nakedness! Thou art filled with shame instead of glory; drink thou also, and let thy foreskin be uncovered: the cup of Jehovah's right hand shall be turned unto thee, and a shameful spewing shall be on thy glory. For the violence *done* to Lebanon shall cover thee, and the destruction of beasts which made them afraid; because of men's blood, and for the violence *done* to the land, to the city, and all that dwell therein" (vv. 15-17).

This strophe describes the low and shameful abandon that characterised the Chaldean nation. How can one speak of his *glory*, when the choir has just sung of the *glory of the Lord*? "Thou art filled with shame instead of glory." "A shameful spewing shall be on thy glory," so is the cry full of mocking bitterness and revengeful anger. All these corrupting things are accompanied by *violence*, for since Adam's fall these evils have always supported and augmented each other among men who have united themselves into fellowships (Gen. 6:11-13).

The glory of the Lord will cover the earth, but the violence of man will not be forgotten; it will fall upon him and cover him. Violence (notice how this word is so often repeated) will be answered with violence, as we have already seen in chapter 1. And the choir adds by way of refrain what the Lord feels when His land, His city, and its inhabitants are the target of the enemy's violence (v. 8).

The prophet Isaiah did not put this song about the king of Babel on the lips of the nations, but on those of Israel itself that would exult when the pride of Babel's king would descend into hades and his scepter would be broken. The cedars of Lebanon rejoiced over him and said: "Since thou art laid down, no feller is come up against us... Thy pomp is brought down to Sheol, the noise of thy lyres: the maggot is spread under thee, and worms cover thee" (Isa. 14:8, 11).

Fifth Strophe

What profiteth the graven image that the maker thereof hath graven it? the molten image, and the teacher of falsehood, that the maker of his work dependeth thereon, to make dumb idols? Woe unto him that saith to the wood, Awake! to the dumb stone, Arise! Shall it teach? Behold it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in the midst of it. But Jehovah is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him!" (vv. 18-20).

As we mentioned already, the fifth strophe differs from the others. The reason for this is, I suppose, to be found in the fact that God is directly involved in the matter. The boundless pride of Babel's king had exalted itself against the Lord Himself, no longer against the nations, or even against the people of God. Over against the only true God he had put his deceiving images of wood, iron, silver, and gold. And this became the main cause for his definite destruction. It is remarkable that in this entire allegory the Spirit of God carefully hides the name of the king of Babel. It is a "riddle" that far exceeds the historical judgment over the Chaldean, reaching to the time of Christ's glorious reign.

From the Book of Revelation we know that in the last days another Babylon will appear on the stage as a last unfolding of idolatry. Her golden cup will be full of abominations (or idols), and the Roman Empire, the last form of the great world empires, will insist on the same idolatrous demands as the head of the first realm with the golden head (Rev. 17:4; 13:14-15; Dan. 3:1). This idolatry is branded as a shameful spot by all prophets (see Isa. 44:9-20; Jer. 2:27; 3:9, etc.).

It is remarkable that here the "peoples and nations" (Hab. 2:5-6) pronounce the "woe" over those who adhere to the idols, that *they* proclaim the vanity of the gentile religions. This is due to the fact that their song is a song of the last days, after they have abandoned their earlier gentile religion to turn to the true God and to recognize His kingdom. The last Babylon is silently included in this symbolic presentation. Therefore the song ends with acknowledging the Lord as the only One whom the nations worship. Not only will *the knowledge of His glory* cover the entire renewed earth (v. 14), but *the knowledge of Himself*. He will be "in His holy temple," in His temple at Jerusalem; for these words do not refer to heaven, but to His house on earth (Mic. 1:2; Ps. 11:4). From that moment on, the glory of the Lord that had left the temple (Ezek. 11:23) will have returned (Ezek. 43:4). The entire earth will be silent before Him. He will rule and because of His majesty no one will dare to raise a voice in His presence. This truly is a worthy conclusion of the song of the nations who will from that moment on be subjected to His power.

How must the anxious heart of the prophet have been comforted by this vision of future events. In it he foresaw the outcome of a faith that has learned to wait patiently for the end of God's ways: the pride of man brought low, the nations delivered and subjected to Him, the nation Israel restored, the Lord, who makes Jerusalem and His temple the centre of His glory, praised, and all creatures silent before Him. It caused the prophet to forget to "answer" (2:1). How could he, now that God, instead of chiding him, caused to pass before his eyes His righteousness in the judgment over evil; His grace toward His people that He will also show in the restoration of the nations; and finally, His glory which will cover the whole earth during a reign of righteousness and peace for which the entire world will only be able to keep silent!

To be cont'd

Fragments

He Who Knows the Hearts

And they prayed, and said, Thou Lord, knower of the hearts of all" (Acts. 1:24)

This is a tremendous truth: The Lord knows our hearts. We read in Acts 15:8 that God knows the hearts. He is the One who truly knows the hearts: "And there is not a creature unapparent before Him; but all things *are* naked and laid bare to His eyes, with whom we have to do" (Heb. 4:13). David, too, knew this truth. How serious are the words of Psalm 139: "Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, Thou understandest my thought afar off; Thou searchest out my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways; for there is not yet a word on my tongue, *but* lo, O Jehovah, Thou knowest it altogether" (vv. 2-4). This knowledge was too wonderful for David, too high. He says: "I cannot attain unto it" (v. 6). David could not fully understand this truth, yet he was well aware that he had to do with an all-knowing God. He did not know the truth as it has been revealed in the Lord Jesus. But he rather wanted to bring all into the light of God and judge all that was not according to God's thoughts than to live on with a bad conscience.

And we? Are we always aware of this? How do we like it that the Lord knows and sees all about us? When we are in difficult circumstances this thought can be a comfort and encouragement to us. But when we go the wrong way this thought can make us afraid and restless. When things are found in our life that cause the fellowship with God to be broken, and the peace of God to disappear, then there is only one cure: we must confess our sins (1 Jn. 1:9). Then the fellowship with God is again restored and once more we have joy and peace in our heart.

The Foundation

For other foundation can no man lay besides that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11).

To the apostle Paul the grace had been given "to announce among the nations the glad tidings of the unsearchable riches of the Christ" (Eph. 3:8). As a wise architect he had laid the foundation. He had not done this according to his own ideas and insight. Nor had he done it to put himself in the foreground. For him only one thing was important: All honour belongs to the Lord. For Paul one thing was certain: Jesus Christ is the foundation that has been laid by God Himself. Then he occupied himself with the important questions: Why does one build on that foundation, and how does one build? For it is not only a question of the building material that is being used, but also of the one who uses that material.

We must ask ourselves the same questions very personally. We are not permitted to avoid these questions. Let us be honest and search our heart. What am I building with? With gold, silver, or costly stones? Or do I build with wood, hay, or straw? (v. 12).

The apostle was well aware of his own responsibility. He had laid a good foundation. He had not done so in his own strength, but "according to the grace of God which has been given to me" (v. 10). This grace is also given to us. It is important that we allow ourselves always to be led by the Lord, and do not put ourselves into the foreground. Let us always keep our eye on Him, and Him in our heart. He is the One who has been given by God Himself as the foundation of the Assembly (Mt. 16:18).