

Golden Text Illuminated

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isaiah 6:3).

In this text we are introduced to a scene in heaven, the place where God dwells, where He sits in authority over all things. Around Him are all His angels of various ministries. It is not often that the Bible shows us a glimpse of a scene as holy as this, and we can imagine the awe that Isaiah must have felt when he was in the presence of the absolute holiness of such a place as the throne of God.

Here we are introduced to the seraphim—unique angelic beings that were speaking regarding the person and presence of the most holy God. The symbolism of fire for holiness can be seen here.

The seraphim’s message was simple but powerful: God is infinitely holy!

Why is “holy” repeated three times? One observation is that this might be a reference to the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Godhead, coequal in holiness, power, and purpose. The gods of the world are many and may even show themselves as more human than divine. But the Lord is one, not many. God Himself confirmed this oneness when He gave the Ten Commandments to Moses. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord” (Deut. 6:4).

God is not divided but one in power and purpose. He is in total harmony with Himself and His creation and in the redemption of man. His purpose and methods will never change. “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever” (Heb. 13:8).

Holy is holy; there are no degrees of holiness with God. But man has a problem with personal holiness because he bears the seeds of Adam’s

transgression and needs a new relationship with God’s holiness. Sin and holiness can never occupy the heart of man at the same time. Even in our prayer life, sin can build a wall of hindrance to God’s blessing. “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me” (Ps. 66:18).

In considering the statement made by the seraphim, “The whole earth is full of his glory,” we see that all that God created shows His signature and glorifies Him. Regarding man’s unacceptable behavior, the Apostle Paul reminded us that there is no excuse for our sin because all of God’s creation bears witness to the Creator. “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

Life itself, in all its various forms, shows the evidence of a power far beyond the intellect of man. Man is the only life form that recognizes his nakedness and his need for clothes. This is seen after sin entered into the heart of Adam. “And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons” (Gen. 3:7).

It is only the love of God that was able to bridge the gap between sin and holiness. Now we can enter once more into His presence. Because of the finished work of Christ, this bridge between God and man is now open for all.

—George A. Downes.

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“Praise the Lord, call upon his name, declare his doings among the people, make mention that his name is exalted” (Isaiah 12:4).

Praise is something that just about everyone looks for. At the beginning of life we seek praise from our parents. Later we seek it from our teachers in school and then in our place of employment. Praise is the motivation for our best actions as we seek to please those who are important to us.

We worship God when we praise Him, for when we do so, we are acknowledging Him in all His greatness. David was a man who loved God and continually praised Him in all things. “I will call on the Lord, who is worthy to be praised: so shall I be saved from mine enemies” (II Sam. 22:4).

If we fail to recognize the greatness of God, we will fail to honor Him. And if we do not give Him His honor, then whom *will* we honor?

After every battle there are winners and losers; the losers mourn their loss, but the winners celebrate their victory with shouts of joy and singing. Their heroes are honored with public declarations of their deeds.

As followers of Christ, we share in His victory in the battle of life over our great enemy, Satan. As our great Commander, God has won the victory, and our souls have been set free. We now praise Him as we declare His greatness to the entire world. God’s people know, without a doubt, that God watches over them. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us” (Rom. 8:37).

We are admonished to “call upon his name.” In the Old Testament, names were an important part of one’s identity. A person’s name would show his character and make some revelation

regarding him. For instance, Jacob means “heel-catcher” (supplanter). When he was born, he came from the womb holding Esau’s heel. Indeed, his name was not honorable but one of shame. However, God later changed his name to Israel, which means “pre-vailed with God.”

In calling upon the name of the Lord, we call upon Him in all that He is. Whether we say “Lord of Hosts,” “Saviour,” “Yahweh,” or any other of His many names, we honor Him in our petitions. We hear the same encouragement as God spoke through His prophet: “Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not” (Jer. 33:3).

Prayer is one of the ways we praise God because we look to Him as One who will meet our need no matter what may confront us. Have you ever had a close friend who was going through a most difficult time and sought someone other than you for help? You asked him, “Why didn’t you call me?” It hurt to think that your friend did not see you as one who could and would have made every effort to help. We should never view the Lord that way. We should seek Him as the solution to all our needs and problems.

Jesus called us His friends when He said, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you” (John 15:13-14). Could we have a better friend than that? Is He not more than worthy of our praise?

—George A. Downes.

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“This people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men” (Isaiah 29:13).

In this passage of Scripture, God addressed the integrity of men as seen by their honesty and commitment to God’s honor. It is not what a man says regarding his faith in God but what God sees in his actions that is the heart of the problem. The old saying still holds true: “Actions speak louder than words.”

God is impressed only by the honesty of man and not by words that have no substance. Even when Jesus walked among the people, the indictment was the same: “This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me” (Matt. 15:8-9). God is not impressed with mere words that flatter and are not sincere. Would you feel honored if someone complimented you to your face but in speaking to others said something unkind about you?

Nothing dishonest can stand in the holy presence of God, for He is completely holy. How much of a statement can be a lie and still be true? None! No one will get to heaven because he speaks well and flatters dignitaries and is highly favored in the eyes of the world. The Bible asks, “Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully” (Ps. 24:3-4).

To be dishonest with God is to count Him less than God and someone to whom we can show a lack of respect without fear of consequences or judgment. This was the lie that Satan

brought into the world when he tempted Eve in the Garden: “Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). Man will never hold such an esteemed position as to be equal with God; even the angels who stand in His presence would not dare to claim such an honor. How dare any man claim such an honor for himself!

Mankind continually tries to circumvent God’s authority and dethrone Him; even now in our modern day man has embraced the idea of evolution and denied God His rightful place in Creation. As long as humanity believes the lies of the devil, the devil will not give up!

There is no substitute for righteousness, and there are no alternate ways to God. If we are going to walk with Him, it must be His way. “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6).

Our courts are overloaded with cases in which someone was promised riches for a small investment, only to find in the end that the promise of quick riches was only a lie. This is what the devil does. He makes his way seem right and rewarding, but in the end it only leads to death and destruction. Jesus told us that there is only one way to God and there will be no other.

The issue here is that the unregenerate value the wisdom of this world more than the wisdom of God. The Bible declares that some, “professing themselves to be wise, they became fools” (Rom. 1:22).

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“Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. But be ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create” (Isaiah 65:17-18).

Our text states that God is going to create something new, not repair something old or redo something that is worn-out. This creating will be an act of making something out of nothing, as God did in Genesis when He brought the world into existence. Only God can make something out of nothing! While man continually works at destruction, God continually reaches out to man to create in him a new nature, one that is holy and righteous. “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature” (II Cor. 5:17).

God tells us that He will create “new heavens and a new earth.” Once more God will speak, and creation will bow and obey at His command. While we may look heavenward and marvel at the wonders of space, God said that all of this is nothing and that one day it will be done away with—not a trace will remain.

The heavens are what man has always seen as the most challenging of all mysteries, and nothing can compare to their greatness; but God said that even this He will destroy and that it “shall not be remembered.” The pain of an unpleasant experience often lingers as we relive it long after the fact. An act of unkindness torments us and is hard to forgive. In the new creation, all the unpleasant experiences will be gone forever! Most of all, God tells us He will wipe away our past. “For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more” (Heb. 8:12).

Sin, being the disruption of peace with God, cannot exist in His presence; it must be destroyed forever. It was sin that drove Adam and Eve from the presence

of God, and they could no longer enjoy the fellowship that they had when there was nothing between them and God.

Almost everyone enjoys something new; stores continually advertise their new line of merchandise to attract customers. Cars lose their attractiveness after a couple of years, and we just have to have a new one. No one wants to wear yesterday’s clothes; the latest fashions are a must.

God is not going to build on an outdated foundation, but He will build something new, something never having been marked by sin. God’s Word tells us that in this new creation, we will be “glad and rejoice for ever.” Frowns will be replaced with smiles and fear with boldness; here God will be our Friend for ever, and our love for Him will never end. “We, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness” (II Pet. 3:13).

There is no way this new creation can be described in language that we humans can understand. How can one describe the beauty of a sunrise to someone who was born blind? Impossible! “But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (I Cor. 2:9).

Our time in this world is limited, and our plans often fall short. However, God has promised that in His new creation there will be no limits, no end. We will enjoy His presence forever. This will be an occasion for celebration!

—George A. Downes.

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“They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number” (Ezra 3:4).

This feast was a reminder of how God had provided for the Israelites in all their needs as they marched away from Egypt toward the land that God had promised, and of how God had provided for all their needs during the wilderness journey.

God had established this feast as a perpetual reminder that the Israelites were strangers and pilgrims on this earth. They would also recall that they never planted or had a harvest during their journey but that God had always supplied all their needs by His miraculous power. They were to remember that they were just passing through and had not yet come to the land of God’s promise. They were only strangers and pilgrims as they wandered in the wilderness for forty years.

In remembering the heroes of faith, the writer of the book of Hebrews made mention of this: “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (11:13).

This feast was a celebration of the harvest. However, at the time Moses was giving the law to God’s people, they were still on their wilderness journey. By faith they were seeing the joy of God’s promise as already fulfilled.

We, as God’s people, should by faith also see His promises as already fulfilled. “Without faith it is impossible to please him” (Heb. 11:6). As the Israelites moved through the wilderness to a land that they had never seen, they still believed God would fulfill His

promise to give them a land “flowing with milk and honey” (Exod. 3:8). We too must stand faithful to the living relationship we have with God through the presence of the Holy Spirit. “If ye love me, keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever” (John 14:15-16).

This feast was also a reminder of Israel’s continual need for God’s mercy and forgiveness of sins. They “offered the daily burnt offerings by number” (Ezra 3:4). Today we need not have any sacrifice other than that which God has given us in His Son, Jesus Christ. “But this man (Jesus), after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God” (Heb. 10:12).

Now our hope is in a promised land not of this world but of one that is yet to come. “For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (II Cor. 5:1).

God’s people must always have hope—not in the temporal things of this world but in the treasures that are eternal and kept by the promises of God. While Israel was continually reminded by the Feast of Tabernacles, Christians move on in faith in God’s continuing promises that He “shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19).

No matter whether He is telling Israel or the Christians of today that they should be faithful, God looks for obedience in the hearts of His people.

—George A. Downes.

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“All the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid” (Ezra 3:11).

People shout for many reasons—for danger, for pain, and in our text, for joy. Israel’s captors had enslaved God’s people for over seventy years as Jeremiah had prophesied. “For thus saith the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place” (Jer. 29:10).

Some if not most of the people who were in Jerusalem at this time would not have seen the temple and its glory. But they no doubt would have listened with excitement as the elders spoke of its glory and its holy beauty. The temple could be nowhere but in Jerusalem, for God had declared it to be the place where Israel would come before the Lord with their offerings and gifts. It was the place where offerings were to be given and where the high priest would bring them before God: “For the Lord hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation. This is my rest for ever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it” (Ps. 132:13-14).

Sometimes we need to feel the pain before we can appreciate the blessing. Pain tells us something is wrong and we need to make some kind of adjustment to relieve it. For example, the body hurts because there is a sickness in it. If a child never felt the pain of correction, he would continue doing the wrong thing. God allows pain when we stray from His love and seek things that are harmful to our spiritual life. This was the reason Israel was denied access to the temple for so long. “Hear, O

earth: behold, I will bring evil upon this people, even the fruit of their thoughts, because they have not hearkened unto my words, nor to my law, but rejected it” (Jer. 6:19).

Now the waiting was over, and God’s Word was being fulfilled. The Israelites were indeed coming home to the land that God had promised them. The waiting had been fulfilled. Just as a child, having been promised a family holiday trip on the following morning, would hardly be able to sleep the night before because of the excitement, so Christians also look forward to the coming of our King, when all tears will finally be dried and pain and suffering will be no more (Rev. 7:17).

God never forgets His own. He desires only that they be brought to a fuller understanding of infinite love and forgiveness. When the prodigal son wandered away from his father’s care and lost all his inheritance, the father’s love never diminished. The father looked down the lane, awaiting his son’s return. “He arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him” (Luke 15:20).

Our Heavenly Father also waits for the wayward child’s return. When he does come home, shouting and joy are heard in the camp of the Lord, and heaven sings: “I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance” (Luke 15:7).

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“The children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy” (Ezra 6:16).

This was a very special day for God’s people. They would see the temple. Something that they had only heard about was now a reality. Once more the glory of God would descend upon the mercy seat and receive the offerings of His people.

Of course, they would remember Solomon’s prayer to God concerning the chastisement of the people: “When thy people Israel be smitten down before the enemy, because they have sinned against thee, and shall turn again to thee, and confess thy name, and pray, and make supplication unto thee in this house: then hear thou in heaven, and forgive the sin of thy people Israel, and bring them again unto the land which thou gavest unto their fathers” (I Kings 8:33-34). Now they were living in the joy of God’s forgiveness and could praise Him once again in the house of God as they had before the Captivity.

God is a forgiving God and takes no pleasure in punishing anyone, but He reaches out to His children in love and compassion. The Word of God speaks often about the joy, not the sorrow, of the Lord. Before the tabernacle was built, the ark of God was not where it belonged. With joy and gladness David brought it to its rightful place again. “So David, and the elders of Israel, and the captains over thousands, went to bring up the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of the house of Obed-edom with joy” (I Chron. 15:25).

God’s house is a very special place, and He will not allow it to be used in any way other than for His glory. When Jesus entered the temple, He witnessed

the disrespect of God’s house by those who had made it a place of merchandise. In His wrath, He spoke out against it: “[He] said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves” (Matt. 21:13).

Now the house of God is where God’s people are. They are holy vessels in whom Christ lives. Christians now celebrate continually the joy of His presence. “To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27).

The joy of Christians does not rest on circumstances but on the presence of God within them. God is ever present with us. He is the authority of the Christian’s heart. Even when in custody, the Apostle Paul could rejoice because he knew God would always be there for him, no matter where that might be. As Paul wrote from his imprisonment, he could assure the church that it was God’s purpose and design for him to be there. “What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice” (Phil. 1:18).

The purpose of the church is for Christians to gather together, especially on the Lord’s Day, to celebrate God’s presence. “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20). Wherever the Christian may find himself, he is never far away from the love of God, for God lives in him.

—George A. Downes.

Golden Text Illuminated

“So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was entreated of us” (Ezra 8:23).

Fasting is a serious companion of prayer, and it demonstrates a serious issue of need. One may fast with no intention of praying but because of a particular burden that takes away one's appetite. A person may not eat while he is mourning the death of a loved one. So fasting represents a condition of life in which one sees little joy or is overwhelmed by life's burdens.

Ezra's faith was being put to the test because he was concerned about the safety of his journey and especially of all the treasures he would bring with him. It was common for robbers to lie in wait for unprotected travelers and to take not only their possessions but often their lives.

While this exact situation may not occur in our lives, there are times when the prospect of a long journey gives us pause. Some seasons, for example, present the possibility of adverse weather, and there is always the possibility of the unexpected delay. The devil works well in situations such as these! If he can get God's people to doubt and worry, he can cause great harm in the lives of believers.

Ezra knew what to do. This was a serious time that called not only for earnest prayer but also for fasting. Even David spoke about the condition of the heart when it came to prayer and fasting. He identified with the needs of another, took upon himself the personal burden, and besought the Lord with prayer and fasting. “But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom” (Ps. 35:13).

Ezra's faith was not in vain. God brought the travelers safely to their destination. “And he was entreated of us” (Ezra 8:23).

Earnest prayer always finds God's heart and a favorable answer. Sometimes it may not be what we want, but it will always result in a blessing. Before we pray, we should be sure we are asking for that which is God honoring and not for selfish desires. “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts” (Jas. 4:3).

If our hearts are not right with God, it is easy to confuse Satan's work with God's blessing. An addict spoke of waking one morning with no money and a serious physical craving for heroin. Walking with no particular direction, he spotted a ten-dollar bill on the ground—just enough to calm his need. His response was “God answered prayer.” God does not bless the need for sin but seeks those who, with honest hearts, seek Him and His righteousness. “If . . . thou shalt seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find him, if thou seek him with all thy heart and with all thy soul” (Deut. 4:29).

Ezra knew God and the power of prayer. He knew God would be with him to prevent harm from befalling the exiles. His faith was not in the soldiers of the king but in God alone. The formula for victory has never changed: God still stands by His Word. The problem is not with God but with man, because his faith often rests in the world's wisdom. Jesus said that it only takes faith as small as a mustard seed (cf. Matt. 17:20). Is that not easy?

—George A. Downes.

Golden Text Illuminated

“Ye are holy unto the Lord; the vessels are holy also; and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering unto the Lord God of your fathers” (Ezra 8:28).

Those who would bear the sacred articles must themselves be consecrated to God. So Ezra spoke of them as being holy also. We need to be very careful about the things of God and especially about how we handle His Word. The Word of God is the foundation of God’s covenant with His people; it is what makes them special and directs them in truth. “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb. 4:12).

Just as those in Ezra’s time who carried the holy vessels were holy in their assignment, so we must show the same dedication to holy responsibility as we carry forth the Word of God. The Bible reminds us of this important truth: “Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee” (Ps. 119:11).

Ezra also spoke about the vessels being holy. They were holy because they were made for a holy purpose, and the holy and profane can never mix. Moses taught the people this concept of special vessels that were not to be used for anything other than their intended use in the tabernacle. “And thou shalt anoint the altar of the burnt offering, and all his vessels, and sanctify the altar: and it shall be an altar most holy” (Exod. 40:10).

Christians now do more than carry holy vessels; they *are* holy vessels. “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?” (I Cor. 3:16).

If Ezra’s people were cautioned re-

garding holy vessels that were only gold, silver, and the like, how much more must we be careful being the vessels of God in our day? Our bodies must reflect the holy presence of God, and our actions must be consistent with His will. “Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh” (Jas. 3:12).

If we were to visit another country that was very different from our own, we would stand out as strangers because of our mannerisms. Our language would be immediately noticed, and our clothing might be different. The list could go on and on.

Ezra was well aware of why God’s people had been in a strange land for so long. It was because of their sin. Now he wanted to be sure that they would not fall back into the same error and desecrate God’s holy vessels and even themselves. There was no room for sin. God had called them back to their inheritance and especially to the most holy place of all—His temple. They must be a holy people. “Ye shall be holy unto me: for I the Lord am holy, and have severed you from other people, that ye should be mine” (Lev. 20:26).

The bonds of their captors had been loosed; God was their Captain and Leader. Soon they would be in their rightful place and could once more have the temple as their most holy place. They would be able to meet with God as Moses had prescribed by the commandment of God. This was the day they had so long awaited. They were going home!

—George A. Downes.

Golden Text Illuminated

“All the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths, and sat under the booths: . . . And there was very great gladness” (Nehemiah 8:17).

Once more Israel could celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles as God had commanded them. The celebration was to remind them of the wilderness journey of the people of Israel, when they had no houses but lived only in temporary shelters. “That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 23:43).

Through the symbolism of their actions, they would recall God’s faithfulness to His promise and how He had led His people to independence from Egypt’s tyranny to a land of milk and honey.

There have been many important events in history that have shown God’s love for His people, and Israel had many celebrations to recognize that, including Passover, the Sabbath, and, of course, this one, the Festival of Tabernacles. These special days were to remind them of God’s faithfulness. What He had promised, He would fulfill.

People tend to forget; so God has placed these special events in the calendar of life. We too always need reminders; so we have calendars on which we mark special dates and events. Now we have electronic reminders that we carry everywhere; so we are without excuse if we ever forget something.

We, as Christians, have the most important of all symbols to remind us of God’s eternal love—the Cross. All of God’s promises are seen in that symbol of redemption. We have moved beyond the symbols of the Old Testament and now embrace the reality of those

symbols in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Now we look ahead to the victory of Christ’s coming again to bring all His people home to His glory. “For 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” (I Thess. 4:16-17).

Israel went forth on the promise of an earthly home, one that still needed the labor of farmers and other craftsmen. Believers now have the promise and realized hope of an eternal home, where time will be no more and we will be forever with the Lord.

Israel needed to cross the Jordan River to reach the beginning of the end of their wanderings. They needed to battle more enemies as they advanced to their final place of victory. Indeed, the battles were far from over; in truth, they were just beginning. Yet their hope was in the Lord. “Behold, the eye of the Lord is upon them that fear him, upon them that hope in his mercy” (Ps. 33:18).

God has not changed, and His Word will never fail. His promise to Israel will be fulfilled. God still looks for the faithful person who will stand against all the doubts of the faithless and affirm that what God said will indeed come to pass. Jesus said, “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away” (Matt. 24:35).

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Golden Text Illuminated

“Thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly” (Nehemiah 9:33).

Nehemiah had no complaint with God regarding Israel’s captivity, and he acknowledged God’s sovereignty over the affairs of His people. Sin must be addressed; it cannot go unchallenged.

When sin was introduced in the Garden of Eden, God could not just forgive Adam and let things continue as if nothing had happened. Adam’s sin severed the relationship of perfect love between God and man. Creation would now stand opposed to Adam’s labor, and he would need to fight the elements just to support life. “And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life” (Gen. 3:17).

Rules are a part of every society; we cannot live in harmony without them. Rules are of no value if there is no penalty for disobeying them. Can you imagine any society without rules—where everyone could do whatever they pleased and there would be nothing to stop them? If someone wanted your car, he would just take it—and nothing would be done about it. You say, “That is not fair.” Of course it is not! That is why rules and penalties are needed.

As God was speaking to the church of the Laodiceans, He told them that their value system was misdirected and that they needed to heed His warning. “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent” (Rev. 3:19).

God is not the “bad guy” just be-

cause we do not understand all that He does; He is working out things for our good—which may work contrary to our will and desires. We desire to take a shortcut to cross a small stream to get someplace, but we may not be aware of a possible danger. If someone tries to hinder us from crossing that way, we might think he is interfering with what we want to do; but his warning could save our lives.

God has said, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8-9). This is a truth we all must confess as we yield to the perfect will of God in all of life’s circumstances. After all, is this not the relationship between a child and the parent? Remember when you were just a youngster and believed that you knew as much as or more than your parents. You were wrong!

Just look at Jesus as He went to Calvary for our sins; the disciples would have done anything in their power to stop Him. Why? Because they did not understand the mind of God. When Jesus was explaining His coming death on the cross, Peter reasoned with these words: “Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee” (Matt. 16:22).

We will never understand everything, but we need to obey in all things. How can we ever understand the concept of being born again or that to save one’s life, one must first lose it—that we must die in order to live?

—George A. Downes.

Golden Text Illuminated

“That day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced: for God had made them rejoice with great joy: . . . so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off” (Nehemiah 12:43).

Joy and sorrow are two extremes of human emotion, and both have their value in the course of life. One cannot be joyful all the time, nor should one bear sorrow all the time. Life needs to be built upon a proper balance of the two. If we see someone who is always laughing and having nothing but parties and good times, we might feel that something about his life is not in the proper perspective. On the other hand, when one is in constant sorrow, we believe that he is bearing burdens beyond his ability or dealing with an illness and needs professional help.

“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: . . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance” (Eccles. 3:1, 4). God has given us special times for sorrow and for joy, and we need to experience them as God directs. “Ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you” (John 16:22). Jesus was talking about His death and resurrection—sorrow because of His leaving them and joy because of His resurrection.

Israel had just gone through seventy years of captivity, of living in a pagan society with no access to the temple. Their sorrow was great and hard to bear. “We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they . . . carried us away captive” (Ps. 137:2-3).

Now Israel had come home. They could worship God as they should. They were at the temple. All the

priests were in place, the offerings were ready, and the walls of Jerusalem were restored. All the people around them could hear the sound of joy coming from the hearts of God’s people. “The voice of joy, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the voice of them that shall say, Praise the Lord of hosts: for the Lord is good; for his mercy endureth for ever: and of them that shall bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the Lord. For I will cause to return the captivity of the land, as at the first, saith the Lord” (Jer. 33:11).

Christians are joyful because we have a hope beyond the promises of this world. It is a hope that is eternal, one that no man can take away. Our joy is not in a temple made with hands but in one that is eternal in heaven. “[We have] an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (I Pet. 1:4-5).

I am sure that those who heard the sounds of “great joy” were deeply impressed. Before they had heard the sounds of the people’s labor as they built the wall. Now it was different; “God had made them rejoice with great joy.”

God makes all those who trust in His love rejoice, especially those who have a living faith in Christ. God has given to all who trust Him a joy greater than any other and a place in His kingdom forever.

—George A. Downes.

Golden Text Illuminated

“I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day” (Nehemiah 13:22).

The Sabbath had always been an integral part of worship to the Israelites; it was to be the most important commandment next to the one to love and honor God (cf. Exod. 20:1-8). God used more words to explain the significance of the Sabbath observance in the lives of His people than He did in the commandments not to kill and not to steal.

The commandment regarding the Sabbath was not a new commandment but one that had been given after God had finished His work of creation. “On the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made” (Gen. 2:2-3).

Nehemiah knew that the violation of the Sabbath—whether it was of the land or the people—had brought them into bondage. Because of it, they had suffered by the hands of their enemies for seventy years. “[They were taken captive] to fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her sabbaths: for as long as she lay desolate she kept sabbath, to fulfil threescore and ten years” (II Chron. 36:21).

The Sabbath was given to remind us that God is the Creator. He alone is the Architect of the universe. His design in creation became a reality for all time and will never change unless He changes it. “All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:3). God has used tangible

signs to remind future generations of a particular event that should never be forgotten or changed.

Another instance is the rainbow, which was to be a perpetual reminder of the Flood that brought judgment on the world because of sin. “The bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth” (Gen. 9:16).

Of course we, as Christians, have a symbol that will never change—the cross of Christ. God’s symbols were never put in place as items to be worshipped. They are a reminder of the event and its purpose.

God never intended for us to just wear a metal cross around our necks; rather, we should carry its meaning in our hearts. The cross, in its origin, was not a pleasant thing. It represented the mark of a convicted criminal, one whose deeds condemned him to a horrible death. More important, it reveals God’s perfect love as He took upon Himself our judgment and penalty. “For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:7-8).

How can we not be obedient to such a law of love? Just as Israel found that disobedience to God would only result in pain, so we must be careful lest we neglect and fail to honor the Word of God. “How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation” (Heb. 2:3)?

—George A. Downes.