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The Linen Workers And The Potters

“There they dwelt with the king for his work.”

1 Chronicles 4:23 NKJV

The Records Of Judah, The Royal Tribe

Even believers who read the Bible on a daily basis, sometimes skip over the genealogies of First Chronicles. They may dislike the seemingly dry enumeration of names by the author of this book, but they tend to forget that the lists of names are alternated with several interesting reports and comments. For instance, in this same chapter of 1 Chronicles we find the important prayer of Jabez (4:10), and the next chapter speaks about the power of prayer in the battle against the Hagrites (5:20). Elsewhere we find valuable statements about the people’s worship and many details of their family life and the history of the tribes.

In 1 Chronicles 4:21-23 we read about a branch of the sons of Shelah, the son of Judah, who were working as linen workers and potters. We would like to focus on these few verses because of the spiritual lessons connected with these two trades and the statement that these laborers “dwelt with the king for his work” (v. 23).

It is also important to notice the main purpose of all these chapters: they focus on David, the man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22), the king who reigned by the grace of God (consider 1 Sam. 16). He is the one who is the central person in the history of 1 Chronicles. In the accounts, major attention is given to the royal tribe of Judah (1 Chr. 2–4) and the population of Jerusalem (1 Chr. 9).

The tribe of Levi occupies another important place (1 Chr. 6, 9), fitting nicely in the framework of the book. King David was a priestly king who acted as lawgiver to the Levites. In these aspects we see David as a type of Christ, the true King and Priest. David not only governed God's people with wisdom, but he also led them in their worship. In the same way Christ leads us in our worship of the Father in spirit and truth. He starts the eternal song of praise in the midst of His own (Jn. 4:23-24; Phil. 3:3; Heb. 2:12, 13:15; 1 Pet. 2:5; Rev. 1:5-6).

Therefore, it seems a good suggestion to think especially of King David when the king is mentioned in 1 Chronicles 4:23, even though this verse is also applicable to his successors.

Fellow Workers Of The King

We know from 1 Chronicles 27:25-31 that David had vast possessions: estates, food supplies and livestock. No doubt, many workers would have been busy with their duties in the royal domains. Among their tasks was to provide the needed linen and pottery. Most of the older translations render the place names Netaim and Gederah in 1 Chronicles 4:23 literally, so the impression given is that the potters lived near the royal plantations and walls or enclosures. Maybe this also applied to the linen workers mentioned in verse 21.

It is unclear whether verse 23 refers to all of Shelah's descendants or only to those mentioned in verse 22. At least one of them occupied a high position: Saraph ruled in Moab. This may cause us to wonder if these old stories refer to the time that Moab was tributary to King David, or do they refer to a previous period? Jewish tradition associates verse 22 with the story of Ruth – David's great-grandmother – and Naomi, who returned from the country of Moab to Bethlehem. The name of Jashubi-Lehem, which occurs here, should then be read as a short sentence: "They returned to Lehem, that is, Bethlehem." Bethlehem, the "house of bread," was the residence of Boaz and the native city of King David. Christ, the great Son of David, was born there (Mic. 5:2; Matt. 2:4-6).

It was a good thing to return to that town, to be back from abroad and then to stand before the king whom God had chosen. This also holds true for us when we have left the "house of bread," the place of God's presence, where we have plenty of food. Then an inner work of the Spirit is needed in order for us to return to Him and rededicate our lives to God and to the Man in whom He is well pleased.

The Linen Workers And The Potters

Both trades mentioned here obtain a special meaning when taken in the light of the New Testament. The linen workers, makers of fine clothing, cause us to think of the preparation of the wedding garment of fine linen for the bride of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7-8). This fine linen, clean and bright, speaks of the righteous acts of the saints – the good works “which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). The wedding garment is currently being woven as we “live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age” (Ti. 2:12). In this sense, all believers are acting as linen workers, and it is very important that we be found faithful in the service of the King, our Lord Jesus Christ.

The trade of the potters shows another aspect of our responsibility. Like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are we in God’s hand (Jer. 18:6). God acts with us according to His good pleasure, shaping us for the task to which He has appointed us.

This metaphor is also very common in the New Testament. The believers are chosen, “vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory” (Rom. 9:23). This is our position in Christ. But in everyday life, each Christian should “be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work” (2 Tim. 2:21). God is continuously shaping and forming us after His will, until we are vessels which correspond to His thoughts. As the great Modeler, He is working in us in order to transform us into the image of His Son.

God-fearing parents and educators should carefully follow this example. They should form the children entrusted to their care as vessels for honor, useful for the Lord. They can only do so by bringing them up “in the training and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). His rights should have the first place. We know that this is only possible in great dependence on the Lord, in close fellowship with Him. Ultimately it is His own good work. It is striking, therefore, to read of the potters in 1 Chronicles 4:23 that they “dwelt there with the king for *his* work.”

Do We Continue With The Lord?

This is, in fact, a principle that applies to all of us. We should be with Him and follow Him wherever He goes. When He appointed the Twelve, the first aim was “that they might be *with Him*” (Mark 3:14). The Christians at Antioch received the encouragement “that with purpose of heart they should continue *with the Lord*” (Acts 11:23). Then we are able to do His work, to serve Him to the end and to fulfill our ministry (Col. 4:17; 2 Tim. 4:5).

Of course, it is a great privilege to walk close to the Lord, but at the same time it is a great responsibility. He expects us to serve Him faithfully, to recognize His authority over us and to give ourselves completely to the work. To be in the service of the King, to stand before Him, goes hand in hand with unconditional obedience to do His will.

When we think of David as we read about those who “dwelt with the king for his work,” many examples come to mind of people who dwelt with him and stood in his service. The most beautiful example is that of David’s mighty men. In their distress they gathered to him and knew they were safe with him (1 Sam. 22:1-2,23). After they had joined him, David became their leader. From that time on they served him. They shared in his rejection and afterward in his exaltation. It is the same with us: we are united with a rejected Lord, but at His return we shall share in His glory.

Another striking example is that of Mephibosheth, to whom King David showed the kindness of God. Having brought Mephibosheth to Jerusalem, David allowed him to eat at his table as one of the king’s sons. Likewise, by God’s mercy we – though sinners by nature – have been brought into the immediate presence of His Son, the great King. We dwell in His house, in His temple, in His city; we sit at the table of the Lord (consider 2 Sam. 9:11,13). We have received great privileges and have been showered with blessings. Let us never forget this. Let us dedicate ourselves completely to the service of Him who has redeemed us to God by His blood.

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