

REMARKS.

1. God had brought the people back from their captivity, and had protected and caused them to prosper in the rebuilding of Jerusalem; and now took place a solemn dedication of the people to God. "A great assembly was convened at Jerusalem; the book of the law was publicly read with weeping and with praise. No scene in the history of Judah is more vividly narrated. The great festival, with its triumphant gladness, the solemn fast, with its lowly confession of sin, and the prayer that followed, worthy to rank for pathos and true sublimity with the dedication prayer of Solomon, were the outward expressions of that loyalty to Jehovah and His law from which it must now have seemed that the chosen people could never swerve."—Green.

2. Verse 1. A revival of religion is always attended by an increased interest in the word of God, and indeed how could there be a true revival without this desire to know God's will? When a man begins to read his Bible seriously you may be sure he is seeking God.

3. Verse 2. The importance of teaching children in God's word and of taking them as early as it is expedient, and taking them regularly to the place of public worship. The Jews were careful in this.

4. Verse 3. The importance of attending to God's word. How often Christ said "He that hath ears to hear let him hear." Give reasons for this?

5. Verses 5-6. The reverence of the people for God's word and their hearty participation in the acts of worship. Is there not room for improvement in these respects among us? We go to God's house too often as we go to a concert or lecture, and not to engage in real worship. We plant ourselves in our seats and look at the minister as much as to say "Here I am, if you think you can impress me you are welcome to try it," or "Here I am, sing to me, pray for me," preach to me, entertain me as well as you can. Would it be an offense if at times, when so disposed, the people should say "Amen," as well as the minister? Would it not help our worship if the people's voices could be heard in it a little more?

6. Bodily attitude is not essential to worship, and yet it is not without its fitness and its importance as an aid to devotion.

7. The importance of preaching so that the people will understand exactly what is meant and what is not meant. It is often remarkable how much preaching people may hear and yet how confused their religious ideas will remain. Do not be satisfied with a sermon unless it gives you at least one clear, strong idea.

Feb. 9.—The Keeping of the Sabbath—Neh. xiii: 15-22.

GOLDEN TEXT.

"Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy."—Exodus xx: 8.

Time.—About 15 or 20 years after the events of last lesson. 429-424.
Place.—Jerusalem.

CONNECTION.

The reading of the law took place on the first day of the feast of trumpets, that is, on the first day of the month Turi. This was soon followed by the feast of tabernacles, which extended from the 15th to the 22nd of the same month. This was a joyous feast, and on the first celebration of it for so long a time, we are told that "there was very great gladness." On the 24th day of the same month, a solemn fast was observed. "The seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins," ch. 9: 22. A solemn covenant was drawn up

and signed by the chief persons. The rest of the people bound themselves—verbally, we may suppose, by a solemn oath—to walk in God's law. All these ceremonies seem to have been observed with great earnestness, and an evident desire to return fully to the ways of the Lord. It was probably while the people were thus gathered together that lots were cast "to bring one out of ten to dwell in Jerusalem." There was a reluctance among the people to leave the places where their forefathers dwelt, even for the sake of dwelling in the holy city, and those who willingly offered themselves to dwell in Jerusalem were blessed by the people, ch. 11: 2. The rulers of the people all resided within its walls. It was not until after all these things that the wall was dedicated. This dedication was the occasion of great rejoicing over the completed work. So that "the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off," ch. 12: 43. "For eleven years, Nehemiah continued to rule and reform in Jerusalem (B. C. 433) he returned to Persia for a few years. Immediately there sprang up great abuses. The old heathen enemy, Tobiah the Ammonite, gained a dwelling and storehouse in one room off the Temple. The tithes were neglected or refused. The Jews intermarried with the heathen; a heathen colony had settled in Jerusalem itself, the Sabbath was neglected and desecrated. After some ten years' absence Nehemiah returned from Persia, and immediately set to work again at reform. He thrust out Tobiah, he caused them to bring tithes for the temple service; and the lesson to-day records his efforts in favor of the Sabbath."—Peloubet. Beyond this date, we know nothing of Nehemiah's history. Josephus tells us that he lived to a great age and died after doing many excellent things. His character deserved study, being one of the noblest and purest, most generous, and yet most humble, to be met with in any history. The prophet Malachi probably was a contemporary. His writings refer to such a state of things as came about in Nehemiah's absence.

EXPOSITION.

Verse 15. Those days, *i. e.*, after Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem, and whilst engaged in reforming the abuses which had sprung up during his absence. Wine-presses. Among the Jews these "consisted of two receptacles or vats placed at different elevations, in the upper one of which the grapes were trodden, while the lower one received the expressed juice. The two vats were usually dug or hewn out of the solid rock. Ancient wine-presses so constructed are still to be seen in Palestine."—Smith. The wine-presses were generally constructed in the vineyards, (see Matt. 21: 33), but in times of war and danger they were built in cities, so that Nehemiah may have seen this *trading* going on in Jerusalem. On the Sabbath. See Exod. 20: 8-11, 11: 12-17. The Jews seem to have desecrated the Sabbath before their captivity. See Jeremiah 17: 21-27. Their captivity must have resulted in an almost total disregard of the seventh day, for they were then subject to their heathen conquerors who kept not the Sabbath themselves, and would hardly permit the captive Jews to "do no manner of work" on that day. "On the return from captivity, the Sabbatical rest appears to have been one of the institutions most difficult to re-establish."—Cook. Bringing in sheaves, &c. These various operations seem to have been witnessed in Jerusalem. Remember that "in the East the farmers all live in villages and towns, and go forth to cultivate the surrounding country. It is not unusual, therefore, for them to bring their harvest home to thresh it."—Thomson. Festified in the day, *i. e.*, protested concerning the day, protested against the desecration of it. That they would not desecrate the Sabbath was one of the points of their covenant, made with God a few years before this. See Neh. 10: 31.

Verse 16. Men of Tyre. "Since the days

of David and Solomon the Jews had always had business dealings with the merchants of Tyre." The east coast of the Mediterranean, on which Tyre was situated, abounded in fish. For carrying on their trading some Tyrians seem now to have made Jerusalem their home, and their presence would only have the effect of leading to violations of God's law.

Verse 17. The nobles, &c., *i. e.*, the higher classes, the men of influence generally. Contended. On the one hand, Nehemiah, backed up by the law of God, on the other, all the buyers and sellers and farmers with their trade interests and their crops and their eagerness for gain.

Verse 18. Not only had they God's command concerning the Sabbath, but they also had before them their nation's experience in being punished for the neglect of His command. In the face of both of these they were now desecrating the seventh day.

Verse 19. The Jews regarded the Sabbath as commencing at sunset of the previous day. That the gates should be shut, &c., so that there could be no going out and in of traders and husbandmen, and that the city might be quiet on the sacred day. Some of my servants, &c. Nehemiah's policy was always thoroughgoing; not only did he command that the gates should be shut, but he also appointed watchmen to see that they were kept shut and that no burden should be brought in.

Verse 20. So the merchants . . . lodged,

8. No doubt surprised and vexed with this new order of things, and looking for a stray customer outside the gate, or for a chance to get in by stealth, or impatiently waiting till the Sabbath was past.

Verse 21. But Nehemiah was not the man to leave his work half done. Had these men been allowed thus to congregate before the gate, the result would soon have been that they would get in some way, and the attempt at reform would have been defeated. The threat of this verse put an end to it. This verse is exceedingly laconic; evidently Nehemiah was not a man to be trifled with.

Verse 22. Cleanse themselves. This refers to ceremonial cleansing, which consisted in washing with water and (if the offence or defilement was great enough) offering sacrifices. That they should . . . keep the gates. "At first Nehemiah had employed his own retainers in keeping the gates. But, as this was inconvenient, he now made a change, and assigned the duty to the Levites, as one which belonged to them, since the object of the regulation was the due observance of the Sabbath."—Cook. Remember me, O my God. See Heb. 6: 10, Matt. 10: 42, 2 Timothy 4: 7, 8. God's children are rewarded here and hereafter for their faithfulness, and this by no means conflicts with the truth, that we are "justified freely by His grace."

REMARKS.

1. Is the obligation to keep the Sabbath still binding? The command to keep it is one of the ten commandments, not a part of the Mosaic ceremonial law. Christ did not repeal this command, but always kept it Himself. What He did oppose was the turning of Sabbath observance into a heavy burden instead of making it a source of blessing for man. See Mark 2: 27-28. In a question of this kind the example of the apostles is authoritative, and they always observed the day of rest. God has written this law, not only in the Bible, but in our nature with its necessities: we need one day in seven of special rest for our bodies, of special service for our souls.

2. The question of Sabbath observance is a leading one in our day. There is a continual struggle on the part of many to break down its obligations and turn it into a day of pleasure-seeking.

3. Man cannot work seven days in the week.