

The Sunday School

Our Bible School.

Notes and Suggestions on the International Lessons.

By S. John Duncan-Clark.

IN the series of lessons we studied together last month we were given a striking picture of the conflict between truth and error in the Assyrian capital. It is a picture that has its lessons for all the ages, and in the attitude of Daniel and his three companions reveals the position that must be occupied by the friends of God against His enemy the world, as well to-day as in the days gone by. No compromise of light with darkness, no bending of knees, no giving of homage to the golden gods of modern materialism is consistent with the name of Christian. After all, Daniel the Hebrew captive in Babylon was the freest man in the empire of Assyria; and the Christian who to-day recognizes no law but God's, and no claims but the claims of Christ, has the widest liberty to live and act of any man that walks the earth.

The next three lessons for our study are taken from the prophecy of Ezekiel, and contain a portion of God's message of rebuke and encouragement to His exiled people. These words, spoken during the period of captivity, are specifically intended for Judah in its peculiar circumstances and needs; but they have application to the requirements of all God's people, in all ages, who are strangers in a strange world, arrayed in opposition against the powers of darkness. The fourth lesson for August deals with the close of the captivity and the return of Judah to their own land. Before going on to the study of the appointed passages, a few words concerning Ezekiel and his prophecy may prove helpful.

Ezekiel.

The Dante of Old Testament Literature.

Ezekiel was carried captive to Babylon about B.C. 597, at the time of Jerusalem's destruction. He was probably about thirty years of age (1:1) at the time and his prophecy extended over a period of twenty-two years, from B.C. 592-570. In the neighborhood of Babylon he seems to have taken up his dwelling at Tel-abid by the river Chebar, possibly one of the great canals near the imperial city. Here he proclaimed the messages of God to His captive people, denouncing the sin that had resulted in their overthrow, and depicting the glorious future that waited upon their repentance and return.

His style is peculiar to himself among the Old Testament writers. Professor Moulton gives it the descriptive term of "emblem prophecy." Ezekiel followed the plan of using some objective symbol as text for a discourse. It is important to remember this in the interpretation of his prophecies, lest the attention be confined to the symbol more closely than is wise, and the prophet's own elaboration of it be overlooked. Ezekiel has been called the Dante of Old Testament literature, in contrast to Isaiah who is compared with Milton. A careful perusal of Macaulay's "Essay on Dante" is recommended by high authority as the best preparation for a study of Ezekiel's style.

Another distinctive characteristic of our prophet is the elaborate arrangement of his book. Professor Moulton divides the prophecy into seven books, each further subdivided, except the central book, into seven discourses. He finds, also, that some of the final discourses are of a seven-fold structure, and have a tendency to climax. This symmetrical arrangement does not imply anything artificial in method, but merely a habit of thinking in numerical divisions, which is no uncommon literary characteristic. Professor Moulton's divisions of the prophecy are as follows:

Book I.—The Opening of the Message, 1:1—11:25.

Book II.—The Seven-fold Token, 12:1—14:23.

Book III.—The Seven-fold Parable, 15:1—19:14.

Book IV.—Judgment of the Enquiring Elders, 20:1-44.

Book V.—Seven Last Words, 20:45—24:27.

Book VI.—Dooms of the Nations, 25:1—32:32.

Book VII.—The Fall and the Restoration to Come, 33:1—end.

The three passages for our study all belong to this last division. The first of these falls on the third subdivision of book seven concerning Mount Seir and the Mountains of Israel, and is entitled

The New Heart.

(Lesson for August 6, 1899.)

To appreciate the full significance of this passage, the immediate context should be read beginning with 35:1. Parallel passages will be found in Ezek. 11:14-25, Jer. 31:31-34. A study of these in their environment will make clear that the prophet, contemplating the downfall of his people and the desolation of their land, describes from amid the evidences of ruin and disaster a coming day when the barren hills will be rich with verdure, and wasted fields luxuriant with corn and wine. The depopulated towns and cities will be crowded again with the busy feet of men and women; prosperity shall return and dwell within her borders. Still more he sees in the unfolding vision of the future. Not only shall there be a revival of material wealth, but there shall be a mighty spiritual revival. Not only a clean land, but a clean people to dwell in it, find a place in the Divine purpose as revealed to the prophet. The portion of this prophecy referring to the land is

EVEN NOW BEING FULFILLED

in Palestine. Within the last twenty-five years a most remarkable change has taken place in the appearance of the country. The mountain sides have begun to assume an appearance of cultivation. Vineyards spread their luxuriant verdure over the sunny slopes of Judea's hills, and the once deserted villages echo again to the quaint song of the women at their work, or the laughter of the children playing in the streets. The process of prophetic fulfillment has reached the verse immediately preceding that with which our lesson passage begins (ver. 24), "For I will take you from among the nations, and gather you out of all countries and will bring you into your own land." The present mighty movement on the part of Israel toward the land of their fathers, which forms one of the most significant