

The Sunday School.

INTERNATIONAL LESSONS.

LESSON IX.

March 2, 1879. } THE PRAYER OF THE PENITENT. } Psalms, li. 1-13.

GOLDEN TEXT.—"Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin."—Psalms li. 2.

HOME STUDIES.

- M. Psalm vi. 1-10. Mercy sought.
- T. Psalm xxxviii. 1-22. Supplication in distress.
- W. Psalm li. 1-13. The prayer of the penitent.
- Th. Psalm cxxx. 1-8. "Out of the depths."
- F. Luke xv. 11-24. The return of the penitent.
- S. Luke xviii. 10-14. The pardon of the penitent.
- S. Psalm cxvi. 1-19. The gratitude of the penitent.

HELPS TO STUDY.

This Psalm, written by David, after he had fallen into terrible sin, when the faithful words of the prophet Nathan had aroused his conscience (1 Sam. xi. xii.), is the expression of a deep and unfeigned repentance. The home thrust "Thou art the man," pierced him to his heart; and the psalm is but the fuller record of the confession, "I have sinned." "So profound a conviction of sin, so deep and unfeigned a penitence; so true a confession, a heart so tender, so contrite, a desire so fervent for renewal, a trust so humble, so filial, in the forgiving love of God, are what we find nowhere else in the Old Testament, but what we might merely expect from the man after God's own heart."

Observe I. THE PLEA—vers. 1, 2. This underlies the whole outpouring of the penitent heart. There is hope. Without it there can be no godly sorrow, only remorse or despair. This hope has its ground and source not in self, in self-confidence, or self-excusing, but in the Divine Mercy. Ps. xxv. 6, 7, which the psalmist exhausts words to describe. It is not only kindness, but loving-kindness, and tendermercies, not one, but many, a multitude. So full, so rich, so free, so manifold is that on which alone rests the sinner's hope. It is God's glory. Ex. xxxiii. 7, 19; His delight, Micah vii. 18. In this plea there is briefly set forth what is afterwards exemplified, confession and power; and as the same words recur, it will be best to consider them as they are expanded.

II. CONFESSION—vers. 3-6. It is from the very heart. I know, not merely "acknowledge." He refers to that which is before confession and which leads to it. He has discerned the true nature of sin and of his own exceeding sinfulness. He describes it by three words. Transgression sets forth the evil as a departure from God, defection from His will, renunciation of His allegiance, distrust of His love.

Sin describes the evil as "a coming short of the mark," of the ideal of manhood. Sin is unnatural, contrary to our nature. The sinless Jesus is the perfect man. Iniquity sets forth the guilt we have incurred, the punishment we deserve, the condemnation under which we lie. Such is the dreadful nature of the spectre which haunts the sinner. It is, he says, ever before me; he feels not merely the terror of God's wrath, but the sorrow of having done despite to God's love and goodness. For he adds, "against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned." This thought swallows up everything else, even the wrong done to his neighbour. And even the latter is in reality against God, in whose image he was made, and in whose life he lives. "When ye sin against the brethren, ye sin against Christ." 1 Cor. viii. 12; Matt. xxv. 40-44.

That thou mightest be justified, does not mean that the sin was done in order to set forth God's righteousness; but that the confession was made so that God might be proved right and true in what He had said concerning the guilt of the sinner; and is clearly indicated when He entered into judgment with and punished the transgressor. In Hosea viii. 2, we find "that" used in a similar sense.

Sin in man is not a series of isolated acts. It consists in a corrupt and sinful nature, of which the transgressions are the outgoings. David acknowledges this sinfulness of his whole being from its very beginning, not in extenuation but in aggravation of his offences. It is sin in its root, the in-born sinfulness which corrupt children inherit from corrupt parents—John iii. 6; Eph. ii. 3; Job. xiv. 4. Hence the change which the sinner needs and which God requires is a most thorough and radical one; not merely reformation, but regeneration. Thou desirest truth, reality, heart-fidelity, in the inward parts; and in the hidden part, the inmost recesses of the conscience and understanding. Thou wilt make me know wisdom, will give enlightenment. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and Christ Himself is wisdom.

David shows that he has been made wise unto salvation. He knows himself, his sin and need. He knows God, His truth which judges the sin, His mercy which brings salvation. Have we attained to this knowledge and has it led us to confess our sins and cast ourselves upon the Divine mercy?

III. THE PRAYER—vers. 7-13.

It consists of two parts:—

1. Prayer for forgiveness—vers. 7-9. Notice first the terms in which he describes the forgiveness he seeks. Blot out (vers. 1, 9), which means to unmake that which is done, as if it had not been done; to erase as from a book (Ex. xxxiii. 34; Num. v. 23; Ps. lxxix. 28), sin being regarded as a debt to wipe away and so entirely and completely remove,

as a man with a dish (2 K. xxi. 13) as a cloud is blotted out, swept away by the wind—Isai. xlv. 22. The same word is used in both places.

Wash me (Vers. 2, 7). Sin resembles filth, and so the remission of it is compared to washing—Isai. i. 16; Jer. ii. 22; iv. 14; Mat. iii. 2, 3.

Cleanse (ver. 2). is a word used by the priest who pronounces clean "the leper who has been purified. So our High Priest declares to the penitent, "Thy sins are forgiven thee." Matt. ix. 2; Luke vii. 48.

Thou shalt—here is his strong confidence which makes his petition a declaration purge me with hyssop (Note 1) Luther translates, "Unsin me with hyssop," set me free from its guilt. The hyssop was in constant use in sprinkling the sacrificial blood—Ex. xii. 22. It was used in the cleansing of a leper, and of one defiled by contact with the dead—Lev. xiv. 4, 6, 49; Num. xiv. 6, 18; 1 Kings iv. 33. David prays for that cleansing of which the sprinkling with hyssop was but an emblem and symbol Heb. ix. 19.

Hide Thy face from my sins. God can only look upon sin in wrath and with displeasure. But God can and does look upon the sinners with love and in compassion.

Notice, secondly, the results of the forgiveness. Perfect cleansing I shall be whiter than snow—Isai. i. 18. God's forgiveness is full and complete. The blood of Christ cleanseth from all sin—1 John i. 7. Joy and gladness will spring up in his heart when God makes him hear the message of His mercy, the assurance of forgiveness. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit, a never-failing grace—Eph. ii. 10; Gal. vi. 15.

2. Prayer for renewal—vers. 10-12. He desires not only pardon, but entire renewal of heart, sanctification, to be made holy.

Create, the Christian is a new creature in Christ Jesus—Eph. ii. 10; iv. 24; Jer. xxiv. 7; Ezek. xi. 19; xxxvi. 26. This new nature is described as a clean heart; if you would have the streams of life pure, make the heart pure whence they flow—Prov. iv. 23. From an evil heart evil deeds will proceed—Mk. vii. 21. A steadfast spirit, one that is firm, not easily swayed through its own weakness or through blasts of temptation.

Cast me not away. His longing and desire are for God. He dreads separation from Him. Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. He shudders lest he should be left to himself. He feels, as never before, his own weakness and his need for Divine help. He cries out, therefore, for the continual succour of that Divine Spirit, who is the only source of every good thought, of every earnest desire, of every steadfast resolve.

Restore to me the joy. The gladness of forgiveness (ver. 8) will be followed by the joy of victory over sin, of progress in the truth. The believer will go on from joy to joy until he enters at last into the fulness of the joy of salvation. Uphold me, sustain, support me with a free spirit, a willing, prompt, ready, ardent spirit. Some refer it to God, and render "a freely-bestowed spirit."

This beautiful prayer passes into—

3. A Resolution (ver. 13), which sets forth the greatness of his newly found joy. Then will I teach transgressors. The blessings he has found are so great, he must tell others of them. The love which has entered his heart goes out in loving desire for the good of others. Besides, as he knows how much harm his sin has done to others, and how terrible a stumbling block it has been, he is anxious, as far as possible, to undo the evil. Such a man, too, a sinner saved, is best qualified to tell the glad tidings to others. St. Paul, when he preached, "Christ Jesus came to save sinners," could add most feelingly, "of whom I am chief." After Jesus had asked Peter, "lovest thou Me?" he added "Feed My sheep." Love for Christ is the best qualification for one who would help or teach others; so also helping others is the best proof that we love Christ.

EXPLANATORY NOTES.

1. Hyssop. At one time the commentators supposed hyssop to be the same as our marjoram (or organum) or else as the *hyssopus officinalis*: but now the opinion of Dr. Royle finds very general acceptance, and it is identified with the caper-plant, which the Arabs call *azef*, and botanists *capparis spinosa*. The caper-plant affects dry and arid localities, such as the sides of time-worn walls and abrupt precipices; and to these dreary scenes its long trailing stems and bright green leaves lend a pleasant covering.—*Bible Plants*.

SUPERINTENDENT'S INSTRUCTIONS TO SABBATH-SCHOOL TEACHERS.

[The following "Instructions to Teachers" were prepared by Rev. T. F. Fotheringham for his Sabbath-School at Norwood. We give them here in the hope that Superintendents, who are desirous of bringing their schools into proper system and order, may find them useful, if only as pateras, in preparing similar instructions for their own use.]

1. No scholar is to get credit for having perfectly committed a verse of Scripture, or answer in Shorter Catechism, if a mistake is made in a single word, absolute accuracy should be insisted on.

2. Every space in the report should be filled up. If there is nothing to enter in any column, then "o" should be written. If the scholar is absent, then "ab" should be inserted in the first column, and "o" in the others.

3. If a scholar repeats verses for a Sabbath on which he

was absent, these are to be entered for the Sabbath on which they were repeated.

4. The questions in the first column under "Shorter Catechism" are to be asked while teaching the lesson, and in such a connection that they will throw light upon it.

5. The following abbreviations should be used by all:—late, "l"; absent, "ab"; prepared, "p"; half-prepared, "zp"; unprepared, "unp"; misbehaviour, "m."

6. If a scholar is absent, the teacher will ascertain the reason, and report to the pastor or superintendent before the following Sabbath; and, if twice absent in succession, will call at the scholar's home.

7. It is taken for granted that no Teacher will be absent from the school, except from a cause wholly beyond his control; and when so obliged to absent themselves, will notify the pastor or superintendent, and suggest a substitute.

N. B. A teacher frequently absent from his class will be requested to resign.

8. At the close of each session of the school the teachers will repair to the Bible-class room unitedly to ask the Divine blessing upon the lessons taught.

DECAY IN THE BELIEF IN WITCHCRAFT.

A doctrine, the denial of which two centuries ago in New England would have been considered proof positive of infidel tendencies and a long stride towards atheism; a doctrine which the most revered divines identified with a standing or falling Bible; which was commended to favour by the almost concurrent voices of the learned of preceding Christian ages; which bishops and councils had stamped with a solemn approval; on the ground of which death had been inflicted on thousands upon thousands of men and women, especially from the thirteenth century onwards—this doctrine has now disappeared. It is alien to our consciousness. It is no longer included in the stock of religious beliefs. The first skepticism respecting it was resented and deplored by good men as an evidence of the degeneracy "of the present age,"—that had "present age" which good men in every generation have pronounced worse than any other before it. The first signs of the obsolescence of this ancient belief were observed with dismay by sincerely pious men, who rallied for the defence of the faith, and grasped the ark more tenaciously the more they saw it to be in danger. They hurled their proof-texts—"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live;" they spurned the novel interpretations which made the "witch" to be a mere juggler; they shouted, "Sadducee;" they scattered their sarcasms on the effrontery of the new lights who fancied themselves on a loftier pinnacle than the generations before them. All was in vain. The obsolescent belief soon became obsolete. The eighteenth century smiled at the credulity of the seventeenth; and the nineteenth century does the same. Witchcraft, along with faith in it, has vanished. The devils who helped their human allies to pinch and prick sleeping children, sometimes to poison cattle, and upset milk-pails, have taken their flight. Salem is quiet from the incursions out of Tartarus; it is actually, as well as nominally, a city of peace. Gradually, and yet rapidly, men came to disbelieve what they had before believed. Emancipated from the old tenet, they began to deride it as a weak superstition. Spasmodic efforts to save the decaying doctrine proved useless. Even the potent voice of Wesley fell on listless ears.—*Prof. Geo. P. Fisher in Sunday Afternoon for January.*

ANCIENT FURNITURE AND MANNERS.

Half a century ago there was among us a real respect for aged people, outside of the circle of near kinship. Boys and girls on the roadside were not ashamed to "make their manners" to their elders, who, in turn, had the politeness to return their courteous thanks for this youthful civility. That was a good symptom of the social sentiment. But the movement of the spirit of the age has left this mostly behind; and with this respectful feeling for those whose years and position entitle them to an honorable regard, has gone, to a perilous extent, the reverence of many for the authority of the parental rule, for the authority also of the State and the statute-book. It is very difficult to break down a proper habit of esteem for one object, and not involve a weakening of respect for others. It is very difficult to bring up that lad into a trusty, law-abiding citizen, who has cultivated the vice of a contemptuous disregard for his elders and his betters. Sometimes there has been a servile deference to these, which is the leaning over of a virtue to the other side. That is not our danger. Now and then a passion for the antique is the fashion, and the hunt becomes ludicrous in its eagerness after almost anything which has an ancient look and odor. That is not to be laughed at as a folly except in its excess. But if, while we are polishing up and restoring these relics of our fathers' furniture and wardrobes with so much zest, we would revive, at the same time, and re-enthroned some of their sound and righteous principles of honor to whom honor is due, our dwellings and persons would not only receive adornment, but our land would be toned up with a return of stable, healthful public sentiment much needed to allay the fever, and to purge off the impureness of our general social and civil life.—*Sunday Afternoon.*

But if to-morrow should dawn upon us, and we are permitted to see it all through, it will bring with it a supply for every want which we shall feel. Our Heavenly Father will be in it, as he is in to-day, as he was in yesterday. He will be as mindful of us as he has ever been; and he will open his hand to us so liberally that we shall not want any good thing.—*Christian Signal.*