

The Sunday School.

INTERNATIONAL LESSONS.

LESSON III.

Jan. 19, 1879. } THE MISSION OF NEHEMIAH. { Neh. ii. 1-8.

GOLDEN TEXT.—“The God of heaven, He will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build.” —Neh. ii. 20.

HOME STUDIES.

- M. Ezra vii. 1-28.....Ezra's commission.
- T. Ezra viii. 1-36.....The journey to Jerusalem.
- W. Ezra ix. 1-15.....His prayer.
- Th. Ezra x. 1-16.....His reforms.
- F. Neh. i. 1-11.....Nehemiah's prayer.
- S. Neh. ii. 1-8.....Nehemiah's mission.
- S. Neh. ii. 9-20.....The midnight survey.

HELPS TO STUDY.

The last lesson closed with the dedication of the temple in the reign of Darius, B.C. 515, seventy years after the destruction of the first temple. Darius was succeeded by Xerxes, the Ahasuerus of the book of Esther; which contains the only record of the history of the Jews during this reign that we possess. Xerxes was succeeded by Artaxerxes Longimanus, in the seventh year of whose reign Ezra appears. He was a priest and scribe unto whose heart God had put an irresistible desire to go up to Jerusalem and teach the people more perfectly the law of the Lord. The king readily granted him permission, and gave him a commission which conferred upon him high powers, and provided most liberally for his support. Ezra vii. 10, contains an account of his mission and work. About 1,500 men went up in the second great caravan under Ezra's leadership, B.C. 458, nearly sixty years after the first caravan went up.

Ezra now for the first time learnt the true condition of affairs, and the terrible declension of the people through their intermarriages with the heathen colonists. The necessity for his coming and the reason God had put it into his heart, are made manifest.

Ezra exhorted the people to repentance. A solemn assembly was held, in which the people pledged themselves to put away the strange women, and entered once more into covenant with Jehovah.

The book of Ezra abruptly ends. The book of Nehemiah opens with an account of the tidings which were brought to Shushan, the winter residence of the kings of Persia, by Hanani and other Jews to Nehemiah. It does not appear whether Ezra had returned, or whether the fickleness of the Jews or the malice of their enemies had defeated his plans of reform; but it is evident that things were in a terrible state. The wall of Jerusalem was still broken down and the gates burned, as they had been left by Nebuchadnezzar. It is at this juncture that our present lesson opens with—

1. THE SORROW OF NEHEMIAH AND HIS SUPPLICATIONS.—VERS. 1 TO 5.

Nehemiah (Note 1) was overwhelmed with grief on account of the terrible tidings which his brother Hanani had brought. Four months (Note 2) he spent in retirement with fasting and supplications. His prayer (Neh. i. 5-11) is worthy of earnest study. Notice in it, (1), the *Confession* (a) of the sins of Israel, for he attributes the national calamities to the national sins; (b) of his own sins, for he tolerates sin in himself least of all, a proof this of the genuine character of his repentance. National regeneration must begin with individual repentance and conversion. Each citizen shares in the guilt and responsibility of national sins.

(2.) The *Pleas*; which are two. (a) God's Promise—the word which He commanded Moses. He had fulfilled the threatening; would He not also be mindful of His mercy? (b) God's Glory:—“These are Thy people. They were the Lord's redeemed. For His own sake, therefore; for His name's sake; for His glory's sake, let Him now send help.” 2 Sam. vii. 26; 1 Kings viii. 43; 2 Kings xix. 19; Ps. xxv. 11; lxxix. 9; Isa. xlvi. 1; Ezek. xxxvi. 22, 23.

(3.) The *Petition*, that God would grant him mercy in the sight of the king. This shows that he was persuaded that it was through the king help was to come, and that the king's heart was in God's hand.

After this he proceeds to the royal presence, where he fulfils the duties of his office. For he was the king's cup-bearer, a position of great honour and usefulness. But he could not conceal his feelings; and the king remarked the sorrow of his countenance. It was unusual in Nehemiah, who was of a cheerful disposition, and it was unbecoming in a cup-bearer. It was said it was even a capital crime to appear sad in the Persian king's presence. The monarch was a man of discernment. He perceived that the cause of his servant's sadness lay deeper than any bodily ailment, that it was nothing else but sorrow of heart. Gen. xl. 7; Prov. xv. 13. Nehemiah was sore afraid. It may have been because of the king, for a Persian subject was expected to be perfectly content in his sovereign's presence. Both Darius and Xerxes are known to have put persons to death simply because they were unwilling to accompany them on their expeditions. But it may have been on account of the great issues that depended on his answer that fear filled the heart of Nehemiah. The cause of his sorrow was the desolation of the place of his fathers' sepulchres. This is thought to prove that Nehemiah was of royal descent, for only kings were buried in the city of Jerusalem.

Artaxerxes in reply shrewdly asked, For what dost thou make request? He knew that his cupbearer's statement was only preliminary to the request he intended to

make. Quickly and fervently, Nehemiah prayed to the God of Jehovah. In silent ejaculatory prayer he lifted up his heart to Jehovah, doubtless asking that he might have wisdom to answer aright, and that the king's heart might be influenced to give a favourable reply. It is a most striking example for us. Let us learn to cultivate this habit. In moments of temptation or of trial, in the hurry of business, in the midst of conversation, continually may we thus lift up our hearts to God for wisdom, strength, guidance and blessing.

With this aspiration heavenward, came the answer to the king, Send me unto Judah. It was a bold request, not merely because the desire to go away might be looked upon as a sign of discontent and an insult, but because the object of the going, to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and re-fortify the city, might be by a suspicious king construed into treason. There must have been very strong confidence reposed in Nehemiah by the king. It furnishes another illustration of the way in which even worldly and unbelieving men learn to respect and rely upon godly integrity and uprightness.

Like Nehemiah let us desire to be sent to the places that have need, where the walls of Zion require rebuilding, where there are ignorant to be instructed, where there is error to be opposed. Let our prayer be for God to place us where we can be most useful, and where the need of the danger is greatest; not where the honour or the emolument is largest.

II. THE SUCCESS OF NEHEMIAH, whom God and the king heard.—VERS. 6-8.

At once God's answer came, even while His servant was praying. Isa. lxx. 24. He turns the king's heart. It is noted that the queen was present (Note 3). She may perhaps have helped to influence her husband. The king's enquiry as to the length of the journey and the time of return, shows that he already had determined to grant the request. Nehemiah remained twelve years in Jerusalem (Neh. v. 14; xiii. 16); but he must have had an extension of leave, and in the interim may have visited Babylon.

In answer to Nehemiah's request, the king gave him letters to the governors beyond the river Euphrates (Note 4). He could not travel or obtain necessary supplies without this passport. He also obtained a letter to Asaph, evidently a Jew promoted to office like Nehemiah himself. This man was keeper of the forest, (Note 5). From him he could obtain all the timber necessary for the work of rebuilding the gates and wall (Note 6). Thus liberally and generously the king answered all the requests of his servant. It has been said that the king was induced to do so on account of the Athenian victory of Cnidus, by which the Persian arms had been humiliated, which made him anxious to have a fortified post near the Mediterranean, on the road to Egypt. This may possibly be true. But it does not lessen the significance of his actions as due to the overruling Providence of God. Whatever means may have been employed, it was God Himself who directed all; and all Nehemiah's success was due, as he acknowledged, to the good hand of his God upon him. Cut off from His hand (Ps. lxxxviii. 5), we perish. But with His hand we are sure of success, ver. 18. Whatever be the work before us, to which His Spirit prompts us and His Providence directs us, let us with courage and confidence, like Nehemiah and his friends, Arise and build, for the God of heaven, He will prosper us.

EXPLANATORY NOTES.

1. Nehemiah (“Compassion of Jehovah”), the son of Hachaliah, to be carefully distinguished from two other persons of the same name, chap. iii. 16; vii. 7. Though little is known of his genealogy, it is highly probable that he was a descendant of the tribe of Judah and royal family of David.

2. Four Months from Chisleu to Nisan, November to March, B.C. 444. Compare Neh. i. 1 and ii. 1.

3. The Queen also sitting by him. The Persian monarchs did not admit their wives to be present at their state festivals, so this must have been a private occasion. (See Esth. i. 10-12.) Though the Persian kings practised polygamy, they had always one chief wife, who alone was recognized as “queen.” The chief wife of Longimanus was Damsappa, who must be referred to here.

4. Beyond the river. The River Euphrates. The course to Judaea would leave the Euphrates probably at Tiph-sah, 700 miles from Susa or Shushan, whence there would be 400 miles of travel through the Syrian countries (subject to Persia), before reaching Jerusalem.

The Persian Empire at this time was of vast extent, reaching from the Indus to the Mediterranean, and the Euphrates was considered as naturally dividing it into two parts, eastern and western. (See Ez. v. 3, 4.)

5. Forest. Hebrew, “*parides*,” which is our familiar word “paradise.” It is an Aryan word, and signifies a walled-round place, ornamented with trees, either planted or of natural growth, and containing also animals. It would be well to translate, “the keeper of the king's park,” instead of “forest.” It must have been in the neighbourhood of Jerusalem, and was kept by Asaph. The word “*parides*” occurs only in this place in reference to forest-trees, and appropriately expresses the care with which the forests of Palestine were preserved under the Persian rule; a regular warden being appointed, without whose sanction no tree could be felled. Elsewhere the word describes an orchard (Eccles. ii. 5). Cant. iv. 13.—*Smith's Bible Dictionary*.

6. The palace which appertained to the house.—The word translated “palace” (*birah*) is by some translated “fortress;” and the reference is supposed to be to the fortress or tower of Antonio, at the north side of the temple-area, so well known in the time of the Romans. Others supposed

it to refer to the old palace of Solomon and of the kings after him, which was situated at the south-east corner of the temple-area, and which Nehemiah wished to rebuild.

WHEN I would have mercy I may not find repentance.

To do nothing is to be nothing.

COMMON sense is too uncommon.

ALMOST to be a saint is to be an unconverted sinner.

To mourn for sin is to weep for joy.

ALMOST to hit the mark is to miss it.

THOSE who sail with Christ are sure to land with Him.

To be almost saved is to be lost for ever.

HE who swims in sin will sink in sorrow.

IF there is work for Christ, there will be war with sin.

THE end of life should be to live without end.

LEISURE is the time for doing something useful.

IF I put off God to-day He may put me off to-morrow.

HE who marries for money buys money too dear.

FEW will leave a possession to live upon a promise.

THOUGHT sin may live in me, I will not live in sin.

WOULD you have a faithful servant, serve yourself.

IF I shine to God I care not how I show to the world.

HE who does not feel himself to be a sinner cannot be a saint.

BETTER go mourning with saints than laughing with sinners.

THOU hast none of Christ till thou canst truly say none but Christ.

HE who sails by a compass may compass that for which he sails.

HE has no part at all in Christ who will not part with all for Christ.

NOTHING is so sure as death; nothing so uncertain as the time.

HE is not rich who lays up much, but he who rightly lays out much.

THAT man hath nothing of heavenly things who thirsts not for more.

SHOULD I find too much friendship in my inn, I might forget my Father's house.

SOME will praise and adore the saints in heaven who persecute the saints on earth.

HE who brings his heart to his estate will have an estate according to his heart.

WE must not presume upon the means without God, or upon God without the means.

IT is a fool who praises himself, and a madman who speaks ill of himself.—*Danish Proverb*.

A MAN who is good company for himself is always good company for others.—*Josh Billings*.

A FOOL uttereth all his mind; but a wise man keepeth it till afterwards.—*Proverbs xxx. 11*.

GODLY sorrow, like weeping Mary, seeks Christ; saving faith, like wrestling Jacob, finds and holds Him.

CHRIST has entrusted me as a steward, therefore what I have and need not He shall have in His members who need and have not.

IF any one says he has seen a just man in want of bread, I answer that it was in some place where there was no other just man.—*St. Clement*.

BLESSINGS on all unselfishness; on all that leads us in love to prefer one another. Only by losing ourselves can we find ourselves.—*Lydia Maria Child*.

ALL that we possess of truth and wisdom is a borrowed good. . . . You will be always poor, if you do not possess the only true riches.—*St. Augustine*.

'TIS much easier to meet with error than to find truth; error is on the surface, truth is hidden in great depths; and the way to seek does not appear to all the world.—*Gouth*.

NO man can be a man who has not learned how to overcome self-indulgence; that has not learned through pain, under burdens and crosses long continued, to carry himself right manly.

MORALITY without religion is only a kind of dead reckoning; an endeavour to find our place in a cloudy sea by measuring the distance we have to run, but without any observation of the heavenly bodies.—*Henry W. Longfellow*.

SUFFERING well-borne is better than suffering removed. When we reach the blessed garden above, we shall find that out of the very bruises and wounds over which we sighed and groaned on earth, have sprung verdant branches, bearing most precious fruit for eternity.—*Bushnell*.

Do good as opportunity presents, and don't wait for great opportunities. The Good Samaritan bound up the wounds of the wounded, half-dead Jew, put him on his beast and took him to an inn. But the Samaritan had all his life done the little deeds of kindness, or he never would have done the greater. He who seeks opportunity will find it everywhere.

IN the history of missionary enterprise the Waldensian Church has occupied a foremost place. It forms an interesting branch of the Presbyterian family, consisting of fifteen parishes in the Valley, and two outside, viz. Turin and Rossario. There are at present thirty-nine organized churches, besides twenty-four stations and sixty-two places regularly visited, but having no settled minister or evangelist. It is now definitely proposed to aim at forming a general assembly of the whole Church.