

The Sunday School.

INTERNATIONAL LESSONS.

LESSON IV.

Jan. 26, 1879. } THE BUILDERS INTERA... ED. } Neh. iv. 7-18.

GOLDEN TEXT.—“Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God and set a watch against them day and night, because of them.”—Neh. iv. 9.

HOME STUDIES.

- M. Neh. iii. 1-32... The building of the wall.
- T. Neh. iv. 1-12... The hostile plot.
- W. Ps. lix. 1-17... Deliverance sought.
- Th. Neh. iv. 17-23... The successful defence.
- F. Ps. cxxv. 1-5... The Lord round about His people.
- S. Zech. viii. 1-23... Enlargement promised.
- S. Ps. cxxiv. 1-8... Escape from the snare.

HELPS TO STUDY.

Nehemiah, with a royal “firman,” or safe conduct, and a retinue, journeyed at once to Jerusalem. His arrival, as he was aware, at once awakened suspicion, but he kept his own counsel. After three days’ rest, he made secretly a survey of the ruins of the walls, and arranged his plans.

Then he assembled his countrymen, pointed out the danger of their defenceless state, and urged the speedy rebuilding of the walls of the city. All hearts were fired by his words, so that the response was hearty and unanimous—Let us arise and build.

With wonderful tact Nehemiah arranged and portioned out the work. Every class and every man had his own share assigned him. It was so arranged that most of the people of the city built a portion of wall opposite or nearest to his own house. This created a strong personal feeling in the work, and united public and private interests; a plan which might still be followed with advantage in municipal affairs. Every one went to work except the nobles of Tekoa, who, doubtless, thought the manual labor beneath them. (Neh. iii. 5.) Nehemiah inspired every one with his own courage and enthusiasm. He had brought no new forces nor discovered resources which were previously unknown. But he had aroused the people to a sense of their duty, and stirred up their sleeping energies. So there are ways to be built, works for Christ to be accomplished: that which hinders is simply a lack of interest and energy. The Churches need to be aroused.

The opposition increased as the work went on. All kinds of scoffs and insults were heaped upon the undertaking. But Nehemiah’s only answer was prayer, while the people laboured on with ceaseless energy, completing the whole wall up to half its intended height, because they had a mind to work. How much can be done, when there is a mind to do it. A single-hearted purpose will accomplish great things.

I. THE WICKED CONSPIRACY—Vers. 7, 8.

When the enemies of the Jews (Note 1.) found that, notwithstanding all their mockery, the wall was being built, they determined upon more serious measures. Their allies were summoned, counsel was taken, and a conspiracy was formed to fight against Jerusalem and hinder the work. But this they determined to do, not in open warfare, but by stealth suddenly to surprise the builders and destroy their work.

There are always enemies to oppose every good work; very many and very crafty.

Opposition to truth and righteousness unites for a time those who otherwise are at war with one another.

There have been many such conspiracies, and there will be many more. Compare the conspiracy of the brethren of Joseph against him; of Absalom against David—2 Sam. xv. 12; of the wicked prophets—Ezek. xxii. 25; of the Pharisees and Herodians against Christ—Matt xxii. 15-18.

II. THE CONSPIRACY DETECTED—Vers. 9-12.

No movement of the enemy escaped the vigilance of Nehemiah. He discovered their plot and took measures to defeat it. These were two. The first was prayer, by which he sought help from God. The second was a watch, which he set by day and night over against (not “because of them”) his adversaries. True prayer never slackens energy, but, on the contrary, redoubles zeal and activity. Through these means God sends answers to prayer—“Watch and pray,”—this is the way to overcome all opposition—Matt. xiii. 33; Eph. vi. 18.

Three special difficulties are noted which tended greatly to hinder Nehemiah and strengthen his enemies. (1.) The magnitude of the work discouraged many feeble-hearted ones—ver. 10. The burden-bearers began to fail. The novelty had worn off, and actual work had chilled enthusiasm. Actual service tests zeal, and much that promised well fails. (2.) The threats of the enemy worked upon the fears of the timid (ver. 11), who dreaded lest at any moment they should be surprised and slain. (3.) Those who lived in the towns near the Samaritans endeavoured to recall those of their own people who were helping to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem—v. 12. (Note 2.) This they did ten times. These people lived near the enemy, and far away from the sanctuary; it is no wonder they were so fearful. Those who live near God, and learn from his promise and strength to estimate aright the strength of the enemy, are bold to fight and speak for the truth. Timid friends are even worse than open foes.

III. THE CONSPIRACY DEFEATED—Vers. 13-18.

Nehemiah was only moved by all these plottings without,

and fears within, to take renewed precautions. He set guards beside the low and exposed parts of the wall. (Note 3.) He exhorted the people to remember the Lord. Their strength and hope were in Him who was greater than all who were against them. Josh. xxiii. 10; 2 Chron. xxxii. 8; Rom. viii. 31.

The work was then resumed, but the precautions were not relaxed. The retirement of the enemies did not throw Nehemiah off his guard. He knew that although baffled, they were unchanged, and only wanted an opportunity to re-commence their machinations. While one half worked, the other half, with bow and shield, and coats of mail (Note 4) were ready for action. Even the labourers went about armed. Thus they worked with a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other.

“Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.” Against sin in the life, evil in the world, error in the Church, there must be maintained ceaseless watch.

The Christian is a worker, even a co-worker with God in the upbuilding of the walls of the Jerusalem which is above. But the city is being built in troublous times—Dan. ix. 25. The Christian, therefore, is called also to be a soldier, and to maintain the warfare against sin under his Captain—Eph. vi. 13-18.

We must be prepared for conflicts, and expect difficulties and opposition.

EXPLANATORY NOTES.

1. Sanballat. A native of Horonaim, beyond the Jordan (ch. ii. 10), and probably also a Moabitish chief, whom, probably from of national hatred, we find united in council with the Samaritans. Whether he held any public office as governor over the Moabites, or over the Samaritans, the record does not state.—*Kitto*. He was probably satrap or pacha of Samaria under the Persians, and Tobiah was his vizier, or chief adviser *Crosby*. Tobiah, Tobiah is a Jewish name (Ez. ii. 60). He was probably a renegade Jew, who had become a slave among the Ammonites, and by his talents and cunning had risen into prominence, and was now chief adviser of Sanballat; hence the epithet, which probably his enemies had fastened on him, “Tobiah the slave.”—*Crosby*. The Arabians. The Arabians referred to here are those taken captive by Sargon, king of Assyria, who were carried by him to Samaria, and settled there; for an account of which consult Rawlinson’s Ancient Monarchies, vol. i., p. 146 Ammonites Descendants of Ammon, half-brother of Moab, and son of Lot. Unlike Moab, the precise position of the Ammonites is not ascertainable. It has been suggested, that, as the Jews were also subject to Persia, the great body of these people would hardly dare go to war with them, and that “the allusion is probably to a band composed largely of Arabians, Ammonites, and Ashdodites, which Sanballat maintained as a guard to his person, and which formed a portion of the army of Samaria mentioned in v. 2.” Ashdodites. Ashdod, or Azotus, was a Philistine city about 30 miles from the southern frontier of Palestine, three from the Mediterranean Sea, and about half way between Gaza and Joppa. The Philistines were always hostile to Israel.

2. From all Places whence he shall return unto us. Perhaps the best rendering of this difficult passage is that of Bertheau.—“They said unto us ten times from all the places (from which they came), that you must return to us.”—*Cook*.

3. On the higher places. This is a mistaken rendering. The word means a dry or bare place, and hence, by a metaphorical use, an exposed part of the wall. The “lowest parts,” and the “exposed parts,” are in apposition. For “and,” read “even.”—*Crosby*.

4. Habergeons. Old English for coat-of-mail, from “halo,” (neck) and “bergen” (to protect). Coats-of-mail were common in Assyria from the ninth century B. C., and in Egypt even earlier. They were made of thin laminae of bronze or iron sewn upon leather or linen, and overlapping one another.—*Cook*.

LESSON V.

Feb. 2, 1879. } THE READING OF THE LAW. } Neh. viii. 1-3.

GOLDEN TEXT.—“The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple.”—Ps. cxix. 130.

HOME STUDIES.

- M. Neh. v. 1-19... Grievances redressed.
- T. Neh. vi. 1-19... The wall finished.
- W. Neh. viii. 1-12... The law read.
- Th. Deut. vi. 1-13... Bible study commanded.
- F. John v. 39-47... Bible study enjoined.
- S. Acts xvii. 1-14... Bible study commended.
- S. Ps. cxix. 97-112... The law loved.

HELPS TO STUDY.

A brief review of the history which intervenes between the present and the last lesson will be interesting. Note:—

1. How Nehemiah relieved the distress of the poor, by abolishing the extortionate usury exacted by the rich, and by his own generous hospitality and his refusal to take the allowance which rightfully belonged to him (chap. v).

2. How Nehemiah, by his wisdom, and courage, defeated the plots of his enemies. Five times they tried to entice him out of the city that they might slay him. Then they hired a prophet to flatter Nehemiah and make him take refuge in the temple, that they might brand him as a coward. But this also failed (chap. vi.) In the face of all difficulties the wall was completed, and a measure of security was thus obtained. No longer are they at the mercy of their enemies.

They can now meet to worship God without fear of interruption or molestation.

They celebrate these new found liberties by the convening of a solemn assembly, which was held upon the first day of the seventh month, in the open place to the south of the temple. The people gather themselves together with a hearty unanimity, which showed earnest and anxious desire.

That which brought them there was—
I THE READING OF THE BOOK OF THE LAW, which they desired Ezra to bring.

Observe—1. The hearers. They are all that can hear with understanding. Every one should read God’s Word; all have a right to read it for themselves. The Bible is for the people. This is the great blessing which the Reformation secured us—an open Bible open to all. How hungry these people were for God’s Word, how eager to hear it. Is there in us the same earnest desire to know God’s will, to find the truth? Are we eager to avail ourselves of every opportunity for instruction and edification, or has the very greatest of our privileges made us indifferent and careless? When Bibles were few and costly, and read even at peril of life, they were prized perhaps more than when they are so plentiful and cheap, and there is perfect freedom to read them. We fail to appreciate the greatness of our privileges, and how they exceed those of the men of old. The scene in Jerusalem reminds us of what was often witnessed after the Reformation, when multitudes flocked daily to listen while some good reader read forth from the chained Book the Word of life.

2. The Reader. Ezra the Scribe, assisted by thirteen others who stood beside him. (Note 1.) The scribe was the man of the book, whose work was to study, to translate (Note 2), to apply and enforce it. This they did throughout the land from this time in the synagogue; and in this they are the representatives of the Christian ministry, which is a “ministry of the Word,” and whose chief work it is to study and preach it.

3. The Book read is God’s Word, which is the only rule of life, the fountain of wisdom, the well-spring of hope, the source of all authority, the book whose subject and substance is Christ, to reveal whom being its great purpose. The Bible is the corner stone of national prosperity, the secret of a nation’s greatness, as Queen Victoria wrote to the Queen of Madagascar. The Bible read, un-studied, digested, is the foundation of all true Christian character. Errors and mistakes in Christianity; weakness and one-sidedness in Christian character; can all be traced to ignorance of God’s Word. In the thorough, careful, prayerful, intelligent study of the Book is the hope of all genuine reformation and progress.

II. THE RESULTS OF READING GOD’S LAW. Herein lies the test of reality of all religious inquiry and study. It must be judged of by its fruits. Much seed is sown by the way side, much that apparently finds a lodgement is choked by the cares and pleasures of life. What became of the seed Ezra sowed? Four results are noted in this and the following chapter.

1. Prayer. They worshipped the Lord. Ver. 6. In chap. ix. 5-38, there is a description of a great prayer-meeting. The prayer contains thanksgivings for God’s goodness, confession of their own sin, and earnest purpose of amendment, with dedications of themselves to God.

If every sermon and every reading of God’s Word would only send people to their knees, what blessed results would follow.

2. Penitence. The people wept, ver. 9. Conscience was awakened: the heart was touched; past sins were seen in their true character and their heinousness lamented. When our hearing of God’s Word makes us more and more dissatisfied with self, and uncomfortable, it proves we have read to some purpose.

3. Joy. The people made great mirth, ver. 10. How could this be? Penitence and joy could there go together. Sense of guilt awakened sorrow, but they rejoiced because they understood the words that were declared to them; these words speak hope and peace to the penitent—God’s Word as it reveals the remedy for sin, makes us sorrowful; but it also reveals the remedy for sin, the Saviour of sinners, and with these glad tidings it brings joy to the believing heart.

4. Amendment of life. They thus proved themselves not only hearers, but doers of the Word. They entered into a covenant with the Lord, chap. ix. 38. So we are called upon to offer up ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice.

These are the fruits of Bible-reading. Do we thus prove we have not read in vain?

EXPLANATORY NOTES.

1. These 13 persons were probably the chief priests of the course which was at the time performing the temple service. Only a few of the names recur in other parts of the book; Hilkiah (ch. xii. 7), Malchiah (x. 3.), Meshullam (ch. x. 7), Pedaiah (ch. iii. 25), Urijah (ch. iii. 4).—*Cook*.

2. Commentators are divided into opinion as to the import of this statement: some thinking that Ezra read the law in pure Hebrew, while the Levites who assisted him translated it sentence by sentence into Chaldee, the vernacular dialect which the exiles spoke in Babylon; while others maintain that the duty of these Levites consisted in explaining to the people, many of whom had become very ignorant, what Ezra had read.

A DESTRUCTIVE conflagration has occurred at the Abdin Palace, the winter residence of the Khedive of Egypt. Half of the building was destroyed.