

INTERNATIONAL S. S. LESSON.

Sunday, Jan. 2.

ZACHARIAS AND ELIZABETH. — Luke 1:5-17.

GOLDEN TEXT.—"And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless."—Luke 1:6.

Commit 1:3-16.

INTRODUCTION.

In turning from the Old Testament to the New, we should bear in mind that we are not turning to a new history, but only to a later portion of the same,—namely, the history of Jesus Christ our adorable Saviour and Lord. During the last half year we have been tracing Him and His work through the typical men by whom His Priestly and Mediatorial offices began to be exhibited and through the typical sacrifices by which His sacrificial death for the salvation of men began to be fore-shadowed. The story of Joseph, which we have just left, is a beautiful allegorical history—limited, indeed, but marvellously full and suggestive so far as it goes—of our Lord, and now He of whom the mother of Joseph unconsciously prophesied when she named her son, is to appear in the pages of that same wonderful history as a real living man—the Son of God made flesh and dwelling amongst us. If we who have studied those lessons have been duly impressed by the great truths concerning Christ contained in them, we are now prepared to turn from them for a little while, and study His character and life as exhibited by himself during His sojourn in human flesh.

LESSON NOTES.

Luke 1:5. Herod.—Surnamed "the Great," an Edomite, and made King by the Romans. The word of prophecy (Gen. 49:10) was thus being fulfilled—"the sceptre" kingly power was departing "from Jacob" when the Messiah was revealed. A certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia. The course of Abia, or Abijah, was the eighth of the twenty-four courses into which David divided the sons of Aaron (1 Chron. 24:10). Those that retired from the captivity were again divided into twenty-four courses, retaining, as far as possible, their ancient name and order; and each of these took the whole temple service for a week. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron. Thus both husband and wife were of priestly lineage. *Lizibeth*—the oath of the Lord, or "God hath sworn."

6. They were both righteous.—not merely amiable, or virtuous, but righteous—pious, just, not only in the sight of men, but before in the sight of God who searches the heart; and the proof of their being so is, they were zealous, diving, acting in all the commandments and ordinances, (things ordained, or appointed) of the Lord blameless,—that is, so as not to incur blame or censure.

7. They had no child. God had purposed in His own time to give them a son—a prophet son, the Lord's forerunner and messenger, Mal. 3:1, and he was preparing them through patience and submission to His will to be the parents of such a child.

8,9. And it came to pass, &c. We are told that, at the time of the offering of incense, three persons were employed, and the particular work of each was decided by lot. One had to remove the ashes of the former offering; another to bring in, and place on the altar of incense the pan containing coals taken from the altar of burnt offering, and the third to scatter incense on the coals, and while the smoke was ascending to offer intercession for the people. This last service had, on this particular day, fallen to the lot of Zacharias.

10. The whole multitude . . . praying without,—that is outside the court fronting the temple, in which stood the altar of burnt offering. At the time of incense, incense was offered twice every day along with the morning and evening sacrifice,—that is at 9 a. m. and at 3 p. m.

11. There appeared unto him an angel of the Lord. This was the hour of intercessory prayer—a favorable moment for meeting God's messenger. Standing at the right (south) side of the altar of incense,—that is, facing Zacharias, and between him and the golden candlestick. Angel—messenger of the Lord. For the name and exalted dignity of this angel see v. 19. This was no mere appearance, as some would have us suppose, but a real person. He was sent from God to tell Zacharias what was about to transpire.

(12). He (Zacharias) was troubled—"discomposed," disturbed by seeing such an unexpected visitor. Fear fell upon him. It is natural to fear beings more glorious or more terrible than ourselves, especially when we know they have come from another world.

(13). Said unto him—probably spoke to him in his own language; at any rate, if the language was different, Zacharias understood it. Fear fell upon Zacharias. So far as we know, this was the first direct message from heaven that had come to men for four hundred years. But God's time, so long deferred, had at length arrived. The Old Economy was about to cease, a new one to be ushered in, and the Lord whom men had been so long expecting, was suddenly to come to his temple. Thy prayer is heard. Doubtless the prayer referred to was for a son. Probably both Zacharias and Elizabeth had prayed many years for that blessing; and as they were then aged people, (see v. 7) probably they had for some time given it up, and concluded that their prayer was not to be answered.

But God had treasured up their prayer, and was about to answer it—Thy wife Elizabeth shall have a son, and thou shalt call his name John.—Johanan—God's gracious gift.

14. Shall have joy and gladness, not only the joy of having a son in his old age, in answer to many prayers, but of knowing that that son was to be a prophet of the Most High God, and the forerunner of the Saviour of the world. Many shall rejoice—have cause to rejoice—at his birth. Why? Because, through his preaching, they would be led to believe in Him who was to come.

15. He shall be great, great, as the Heaven-sent messenger who was to prepare the way of the Lord,—great, as a more powerful preacher, probably, than any that had ever before appeared,—great, in his own character—see Matt. 11:11. He shall drink neither wine nor strong drink,—that is, he should be a Nazarite, or "separated one." The Nazarites were usually such by their own choice; we read, however, of three who were such from their birth,—namely, Samson, Samuel, and John. As the leper was the living symbol of sin, so the Nazarite was of holiness. One of the outward conditions, under the Old Dispensation, for becoming a Nazarite, was that he should drink neither wine nor strong drink, shall they who seek to become "separated ones" under the new, be content with any lower standard? He shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, &c. He should thus be set apart by God, in a high and peculiar sense, for a special and peculiar work.

16. Many of the children of Israel shall be turned to the Lord their God—to Christ. This was literally fulfilled in the results of his preaching—John 1:15-42.

17. He shall go before him (Christ). John preceded Christ in point of time, and also in the sense of preparing Christ's way by his preaching. In the spirit and power of Elias. There was a striking resemblance in many respects between John and Elijah; and Christ tells us that John "is the Elias which was for to come"—not literally the same person, but one endued with the same spirit and power, and doing a similar work. To turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the Just. Both these results were seen in the case of all those who were truly turned to Christ through John's preaching, and those were not few. To make ready a people. These were made ready through repentance towards God, and faith in the Christ whom John preached. Such had a heart-readiness for Christ's appearing; but many had only a formal and outward profession of being ready. Prepared for the Lord. The preparation of this people had extended from the call of Abraham down through forty-two generations; or something more than two thousand years; and yet when Christ came, He was despised, rejected, and crucified by them. Some, however, were spiritually prepared for His coming; and readily became His disciples.

QUESTION SUMMARY.

(For the Children.)

(5-7). Who was Herod? What was Judea? Who made Herod King over Judea? (See note). Who, then, really ruled over the Jews? Who was Zacharias? Who was Elizabeth? What were they both? What do you mean by righteous toward God? What by blameless? (See note). What do you mean by well-stricken in years? What great blessing had they never had? (8-10). What was Zacharias' office? What had fallen to his lot to do? What were the people doing outside? They were praying; and, at the same time, the lamb was burning on the great altar; but Zacharias was in the temple burning incense at another altar—what was that altar called? (11). Who appeared to Zacharias? Where was he standing? (12). How did Zacharias feel? (13). Had he any need to be afraid? What did the angel say? Who had heard Zacharias' prayer? What was God going to give to Zacharias and Elizabeth in answer to prayer? What was the baby's name to be? What is the meaning of John? (14). What would Zacharias and Elizabeth have on account of their son? Would anybody else be glad? Why? (15). What would he never do? Who was to come and dwell in him as soon as he was born? Who is the Holy Ghost? (16). What would this holy little boy do when he grew to be a man? (17). Who would he go before? What other great prophet would he be very much like? Can you tell anything about Elijah? What did the prophet Isaiah say about John? (Is. 40:3). What did the prophet Malachi say about him? (Mal. 3:1). What did the Lord Jesus say about him? (Matt. 11:11). Is God as willing to make you holy as He was that little boy? Do you want to be made holy? If so, come to Jesus with all your heart, for His blood, and nothing else, can cleanse away sin.

Parents are requested not only to see that their children get the answers to the above questions, but to help them to do so.

WANTED CONGREGATIONAL SINGING.

Where is a worshipper to be found who is not interested in the Service of Song? If a hymn goes well at the service everybody is pleased and edified, if one goes ill everybody is chilled, everybody feels then an opportunity of spiritual profit has been lost. Good singing reacts on all other parts of the service. It kindles the preacher and prepares the hearts of his hearers. It fixes and glorifies the impression made by an earnest sermon, it translates into emotion the thoughts awakened by the reading of the lessons. Picture, for a moment, a service without singing, and we feel at once its place and its power. No one can say that there is at the present time an apathy on the subject of music in worship. There is, indeed, great activity. Never was there more fireside singing on Sunday evenings, even the good old fashion of singing at family prayers is being revived, and harmoniums and pianofortes in a thousand homes speak to the touch of the daughter of the house as the family worship song ascends. In our churches there is the same spirit. Never was there a more earnest desire to mend matters; never was money so readily subscribed for musical purposes as at the present time. But do this activity and this generosity always take the most profitable form? Ask any man or woman gifted with good sense and religious feelings what is the best form that music in worship should take, and they will tell you that the most heart-kindling music they know is congregational singing. Flood the church with the sound of common praise, and you are lifted to a level from which the delicacies and ornaments of the concert-room seem very small indeed. Concert-room music is like a well-planned and well-kept garden, graceful with studied curve and undulation; gay with well-ordered colouring from a thousand flowers. Congregational singing is like a great mountain, rough in face and outline, sombre, perhaps, and disorderly in detail, but calling up, as we look at it, that sense of grandeur and worship which blots out even the desire for elegance. The weary, the suffering, the sin-laden, the proud, the hard-hearted, the cultured and the ignorant, the rich and the poor yield alike to the spell, and acknowledge its power. Few, if any, will be found to question the truth of this, and if it be true, the conclusion is plain. Organs, harmoniums, choirs, leading singers, new

tune books, and all the rest are only means to an end, and the end is Congregational singing. Would that ministers and church managers could be brought, not only to believe this fact, but to act in accordance with it! Congregations, too, are as much off the scent as their leaders. On every hand the means are being mistaken for the end. Hundreds of pounds are spent on organs; musical people are besought to "join the choir," new tunes are played we will not say sung every Sunday, yet the Congregational voice remains stationary, or perhaps grows fainter.

The whole method is wrong, and the fruit of a degenerate spirit. Imagine the Tollards, the Covenanters, the early Methodists cultivating their psalmody by attention to mere accidents of this sort! Among them the song rose high, and was powerful for good, because every one felt the obligation of joining in it. The organ which sounded at their services was a great human organ, to which every man, woman, and child contributed a pipe. Nowadays we do our praise as we do our fighting—by proxy. We subscribe to the organ fund, and thus purchase the liberty of standing silent during hymn and chant. If we are content with this, the decadence of our worship song is a matter of course. But in our heart we are not content with it; we feel it to be the wrong method. We admit that congregational singing is the end to be sought, and we cannot, therefore, escape the conclusion that our first duty is to teach the congregation to sing. To do this is to strike at the root of reform, and every attempt at this turns the current and makes it set in the right direction. How this is to be done we need not here consider. Only let it be remembered that merely teaching a few tunes by ear can exert no permanent influence for good, and that the only fruitful method is to teach the people to read musical notation as they read a newspaper. There is no doubt that this can be done. Upon what system it be attempted matters not, so long as it is a system which enables dull and slow people, with but little time to spare, to accomplish their end. Such people form a large proportion of every popular class, and a system which they do not grasp is useless.

A rage for singing classes, and a franker recognition of the place of the singing-class in church work, would be a healthy proof of returning life in our worship music. Not long ago I took an American musician, who was passing through London, to hear a choir which met in a lecture hall adjoining one of our London churches. He was much struck with the singing, and took for granted, in his remarks, that the choir belonged to the adjoining church. I had to undeceive him. I told him that it had no connection with the church; that its meeting-place was an accident a merely commercial arrangement. His surprise at this was unfeigned. He said that in America every choir belonged to a church, and that church was proudest which had the largest and best.

The application I leave to those whom it may concern.—J. Spencer Curwen in the Christian World.

THE Jesuits have at last found the sympathy which was denied them even by Spain and Italy. The "English Church Union" stretches out towards them fraternal hands. Its president has written to the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris "in the name of 12 bishops, 2,500 clergymen, and 15,800 laymen of the Church of England," expressing their "indignation" at the spectacle of "men for piety" cast forth from France. Churchmen would like to know who these bishops are. The Archbishop in his reply expresses his grateful acceptance of the sympathy, "all the more valuable coming, as it does, from the members of a religious communion differing in several points from the Catholic Church."