

SABBATH SCHOOL TEACHER.

INTERNATIONAL LESSONS.

LESSON XXI.

May 26, } THE FIERY FURNACE. { Dan. iii. 1-17.
1878. }

GOLDEN TEXT:—"Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace"—Verse 17.

HOME STUDIES.

- M. Dan. iii. 1-18.....The golden image.
T. Isa. xlv. 6-20.....The folly of idol-makers.
W. Deut. v. 1-11.....Idolatry forbidden.
Th. Dan. iii. 19-30.....The fiery furnace.
F. Matt. x. 16-33.....Before governors and kings.
S. Matt. xvi. 21-28.....Loss and gain.
S. Isa. xliii. 1-13.....Safe in the fire.

HELPS TO STUDY.

Many connect the colossal golden image on the Plain of Dura with the image Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream. Perhaps he thought to do honor to the God whose servant had interpreted the dream, by devoting some of the treasure acquired in his conquests to the erection of an image like the one that had represented to him the succession of future empires. Then, with this thought, there came perhaps the idea of setting up a statue of himself, as the great builder-up of the Babylonian Empire; and with this view the whole figure must needs be golden, (that is, plated with gold,) to represent him, and not the head only as in the vision. Then, when the image was reared up, the instinct of an idolater would lead him to make it an object of adoration, and if it was his own statue, he was but claiming divine powers, as many Oriental kings did, as, for instance, Alexander the Great did afterward when he pretended to be the son of Jupiter Olympus. But these are only conjectures. Scripture says nothing of Nebuchadnezzar's motives.

When the grand concourse of princes and captains was gathered on the Plain of Dura for the dedication of the image, nothing in that idolatrous land was less likely than that any one should refuse to pay it homage. Yet there were found three who had courage to do so. But how came Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego present at the dedication at all? Was it a place for them? Clearly it was part of their official duty as rulers in the province of Babylon to be there; and they were quite ready to recommend their religion by a willing compliance with the wishes of their royal master to the utmost extent that conscience allowed. Had they gloomily shut themselves up, they would have lost the opportunity both of showing a godly servant's cheerful obedience, and of showing, also, when the right moment came, how to obey God rather than men. It was to Christian slaves of heathen masters in Crete that St. Paul wrote, "Exhort servants to be obedient unto their own masters, and to please them well in all things." (Tit. ii. 9.) It is a great thing to know when and where to yield, when and where to be immovable.

Why was not Daniel with his friends? It may be that his position sh. lided him from temptation. Notice too the ingratitude of the Chaldean soothsayers whose lives had been spared through Daniel's wisdom and piety, (Dan. ii. 12, 24.) and yet who now accused the three friends to the king. Opportunity was given to the three Hebrews to recant. "It is true, O Shadrach....now, if ye be ready. Did they say, In so serious a matter we must have time to consider? No. We are not careful to answer thee in this matter, that is, we do not need to prepare a careful reply; we say at once, and once for all, we will not worship the golden image. Nothing is more dangerous than parleying with temptation. When sin presents itself, "to hesitate is to be lost." The right answer is Christ's own instant answer, "Get thee behind me, Satan. Then at once they were (Note 1)

I. CAST INTO THE FIRE: Verses 21-23.

Here was true courage. They dared to displease the king, to stand alone against popular opinion, and to face torture and death. They acted from principle, from conviction of duty; not from mere impulse or stubbornness. The root and spring of their courage and high principle was faith in God. They put their trust in Him. Yes, but trust for what? For deliverance? Not at all. They knew he was able; they thought He would deliver them, somehow, verse 17. But if not—they were not sure—it might be His will that they should die for Him—well, if so, still we will not worship the golden image. This is real faith. (Note 2.) The men were thrown in just as they were, in their garments (Note 3) and bound. The furnace had been heated to unusual intensity; and when the mighty men drew near to cast in the Hebrews the flames caught and slew them. Had both these men and the Hebrews perished, this event would have seemed accidental; had both escaped, some might have claimed that there was no fire, but only a pretense of obeying the command; but when the young men live in the fiery depths, at whose edge the mighty men are slain, the hand of God is clearly revealed. In questions of right and wrong consequences must be disregarded. "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear Him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Prov. xxix. 25; Is. viii. 12-14; li. 12, 13; Matt. x. 28; Acts iv. 19; Heb. x. 30; xii. 28, 29; Rev. ii. 10.

II. WALKING IN THE MIDST OF THE FIRE: Verses 24, 25. (Note 4.) Evidently the king, with all his high officers, was present to witness the carrying out of the sentence. But while he looks he is filled with astonishment. For he sees not three, but four men, walking, unbound and unhurt in the midst of the fire. They had been bound with chains, (Jer. xl. 4; li. 11;) but these had been struck off. Acts xii. 7. No hurt is in them. The promise of Isaiah (xliii. 2) is literally fulfilled. And the form of the fourth, the king declares, is like unto the Son of God.

Nebuchadnezzar unconsciously uttered a truth greater than he supposed. He could not know of the Son of God in the sense that we understand him. His words were "a son of the gods," meaning a divine person. He afterward refers to the appearance as an angel. (Verse 28.) Such it may have been—perhaps the angel of the covenant, one of these wonderful manifestations of the Second Person of the Trinity which he vouchsafed before His incarnation. Compare Gen. xvi. 7, 13; Ex. iii. 2, 4, 6; Judges ii. 1; Mal. iii. 1; etc.

Thus Jesus is with His people in the furnace of trial. III. FORTH FROM THE MIDST OF THE FIRE: Ver. 26, 27. The wonderful sight reached even to the conscience of the king, who is compelled to yield to a power far mightier than himself. He now speaks respectfully to those whom he had abused. God makes his people honorable in the eyes of the world, and he will yet make them glorious before the assembled universe. He acknowledges that their God is the most High God, not that He is the only God—he is not yet converted from his belief in gods many—but the Highest of all, greater even than his own god Bel. He further acknowledges that these men are God's servants. Trial had proved them to be so. Thus God's people magnify His grace and goodness; and even gainsayers are convinced. Princes, governors, captains, assembled from every part of the realm, were witnesses of the wonderful event. By them the news was carried through all the provinces, and the very means employed to honor the idol only resulted in the greater glory to Jehovah. They saw these men upon whose bodies the fire had no power; even the smell of fire had not passed upon their garments. Thus faith "quenched the violence of fire," Heb. xi. 34.

Nebuchadnezzar made a decree that any one who should say anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego should be cut in pieces and their houses reduced to mere dunghills. That was good as far as it went—but it was not a command that any one should worship the God of Israel. Though he had recognized the fact that Jehovah was superior to his own gods, yet he did not decree that his people should worship him under penalty of death, as he had in the case of the image he had set up. He was touched, but he was not converted. He promoted the three faithful servants of God. Those who are true to God, God will be true to them. No one, in the end, will lose anything by a strict adherence to his commands. Nebuchadnezzar had the good sense to see that those who had been so faithful to their God were the very men whom he could most trust. It is a mistake for a young man to obey the evil commands of his employer. Those who will not do it are far more sure of advancement, for they are trustworthy. "For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men."

EXPLANATORY NOTES.

1. There are allusions in the Scriptures to burning alive as a punishment (Gen. xxxviii. 24,) and it is now certain, from the monuments as well as from notices in history, that burning alive was practised by the Assyrians centuries before the time of Nebuchadnezzar, and was undoubtedly borrowed from them by the Babylonians (Jer. xxix. 22;) and Chardin, who travelled in Persia in the seventeenth century, tells us that there were various modes of inflicting the punishment of death on those who had violated the police laws, especially those who had contributed to produce scarcity of food, or who had used false weight, or who had disregarded the laws respecting taxes. "The cooks were fixed on spits, and roasted over a gentle fire, and the bakers were cast into a burning oven." He says that in a time of scarcity two furnaces were kept burning a whole month, in order to terrify the bakers, and to prevent their taking advantage of the scarcity to increase their gains.

2. Bernard de Palissy, a native of Agen in France, was a maker of earthenware at Saintes, and distinguished himself by his knowledge and talents. He was a Calvinist; and the French king Henry III. said to him one day, that he should be compelled to give him up to his enemies unless he changed his religion. "You have often said to me, sire," was the undaunted reply of De Palissy, "that you pitied me; but, as for me, I pity you, who have given utterance to such words as 'I shall be compelled.'" These are unkingly words; and I say to you, in royal phrase, that neither the Guises, nor all your people, nor yourself, are able to compel an humble manufacturer of earthenware to bend his knee before statues."

3. The writer states carefully that the men were bound with all their usual clothing on. The special reason for noting this with care was to show that the fire was restrained from harming not their persons only, but their clothes also. The precise sense of the words rendered, "their coats, their hosen, and their hats," is of relatively small consequence to us; yet it may be worth the space required to say briefly, that in the original the first word means (probably) their mantles, the usual outer garment; the second, either the tunic, the usual undergarment coming down to the knees, or, as some suppose, wide and loose trousers. The latter was the view of our English translators in the word "hosen," which at that time was used to denote trousers and not stockings. The last word seems to mean a garment girded on about the person, and not a "hat."

MEETINGS OF PRESBYTERY.

KINGSTON.—At Picton, on Tuesday, 9th July, at 10 a.m.
QUEBEC.—In Morrin College, Quebec, on Tuesday, 16th July, at 10 a.m.

PETERBORO'.—At Millbrook, on Tuesday, 2nd July, at 11 a.m.

WHITBY.—At Oshawa, on Tuesday, 2nd July, at 11 a.m.
BARRIE.—At Barrie, on Tuesday, 28th May, at 11 a.m.
Huron.—In Knox Church, Goderich, on Tuesday, 9th July, at 11 a.m.

STRATFORD.—In St. Andrew's Church, Stratford, on Tuesday, 9th July, at 9.30 a.m.

OTTAWA.—In St. Andrew's Church, Almonte, on the first Tuesday of August, at 2 o'clock, p.m.

WORDS OF THE WISE.

"THERE is no doubt that this kingly priesthood is the common dignity of all believers. 'This honour have all his saints.' All they that believe are now dignified to be priests unto God the Father. And this was signified by the rending of the veil of the temple at his death, not only that the ceremonies and sacrifices were to cease, as being all fulfilled in Him; but that the people of God that were before by that veil held out in the outer court, were to be admitted into the holy place, as being all of them priests and fitted to offer sacrifices."—*Leighton*, died 1684.

THE MORNING HOUR.—The importance of the morning hour cannot be overrated. That the period immediately after rising should be scrupulously consecrated to God; that the earliest thoughts of the day should be filled with God; that the homage of self-dedication should be renewed before starting on another pilgrimage; that we should listen to His small voice of warning and encouragement as it issues from the pages of His written word, all this is so essentially bound up with the peace and holiness of the day, that one might almost say the two are inseparable. The tone of sentiment and feeling maintained throughout the day is sure to take its colouring from that morning hour.—*Goulburn*.

"THE great and good Shepherd of the sheep (as he is called in John x. 11 and in Heb. xiii. 20) 'came to seek and to save that which was lost.' (Luke xix. 10.) When He hath found them and caught them in the arms of His love, He layeth them on the shoulders of His care and strength, as in Luke xv. 45; then they by faith bleat, as it were, after His care and protection till He bring them safe into the blessed fold in heaven. (John x. 16.) You may hear the blessed bleating of one of Christ's flock, 'I have gone astray like a lost sheep (as all his flocks have done—Is. liii. 6), seek thy servant.' (Ps. cxix. 176.) And surely when the Shepherd seeks the stray sheep, and the stray sheep seeks the Shepherd, they will quickly meet. If Christ come into the world to save sinners, and if sinners come to be saved by Him, He will save them, and they shall be saved by Him."—*Traill*.

DISTRACTION IN RELIGION.—The *care* of this world; its petty trifling—not wrong in themselves—simply dissipating; filling the heart with paltry solicitudes and mean anxieties; *weaving*. "Martha was cumbered with much serving." Her household and her domestic duties, real duties, divided her heart with Christ. The time of danger, therefore, is when life expands into new situations; and larger spheres, bringing with them new cares. It is not in the earlier stages of existence that these *distractions* are felt. Thorns sprang up and choked the wheat as they grew together. You see a religious man taking up a new pursuit with eagerness. At first no danger is suspected. But it is a *distracting*—something that distracts or divides—he has become dissipated, and by and by you remark that his rest is gone—he is no longer the man he was. He talks as before, but the life is gone from what he says; his energies are frittered.

"I HAVE exalted one chosen out of the people." This is a precious assurance for the people of God. Jesus is not a being far off; not a stranger to their feelings and experiences, but one of themselves, and therefore able to feel with them and for them. He is said to be 'touched with the feelings of our infirmities.' The miseries, calamities, and sufferings to which human nature is subject, are not to Him a mere matter of hearsay and indifference; He has an experimental knowledge of them all. On earth he was tempted like as we are; He endured every variety of want, and pain, and sorrow; and now in heaven He exercises a tender compassion towards his suffering servants here below. He is interested in them, for they are his own, bought with his own precious blood; He is concerned for them as one closely related to them, for He is truly a brother born for adversity; nay more, He is one with them, for his words to Saul the persecutor were not, 'Why persecutest thou my people?' but 'Why persecutest thou me?' This sympathy of Christ with and towards his suffering people is an extensive sympathy—it reaches to all their infirmities; a proportionable sympathy—answerable to every occasion; a perpetual sympathy—as long as He continues High Priest and we remain subject to infirmities, so long will He be touched with the feeling of them."—*Canon Bardsley* (Exposition of the 99th Psalm).

"THE Church of God is His delight. See what an inundation of sweetening joy there lies on Him for which He had no terms of expression to suit the narrow apprehensions of men—"The Lord thy God in the midst of thee, mighty; He will save, He will rejoice over thee with joy; He will rest in his love, He will joy in thee with singing." He seems, in this expression, to know no measure of delight in the Church, and no end of it—"I will rejoice over thee with joy"—joy sparkles up after joy—it is his 'rest,' where his soul and all that is within Him centres itself with infinite contentment—"Joy over thee with singing;" a joy that blossoms in triumph. Never had any such charming transports in the company of any he most affected, as God hath in His Church. He doth so delight in the graces of His people, that He delights to mention them;—He hence mentions Enoch's walking with Him. And certainly God cannot but delight in it more than in the world, because it is a fruit of greater pains than the creation of the world. The world was created in the space of six days by a word—the erecting of a Church hath cost God more pains and time. Before the Church of the Jews could be settled, He had both a contest with the perverseness of His people, and the malice of His enemies. And His own Son must bleed and die before the Church of the Gentiles could be fixed. Men delight in that which cost them much pains and a great price—God hath been at too much pains, and Christ at too great a price, to have small delight in the Church. Will He then let wild beasts break the hedge, and tread down the fruit of it? Shall not all things be ordered to the good of that which is the object of the greatest delight in the world?"—*Charnock*.